

INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

IT'S SOMETIMES a bit naff to start an editorial with an 'As I write this...', but this month I really have to. Because... As I write this, you find the cavernous halls of the Black Library positively vibrating with expectation, buzzing with anticipation, darn well delirious with joy at the thought that very soon we will finally get to see... after all these years... the first *The Lord of the Rings* movie!

For us, of course, that book is the wellspring, the motherlode, the place where it all really started. Without Tolkien's masterpiece, fantasy today would take a very different shape, and perhaps be far less popular and wide-ranging. While writers like Robert E Howard had made the first tentative steps with heroic barbarians like Conan, Tolkien's achievement was to present a fully realised fantasy world, a place that was not just the backdrop for some battles but a fully realised universe. It was no wonder some dedicated enthusiasts ended up teaching themselves the elven languages or writing in runes. The level of detail that Tolkien had worked out for his creation set the standard for world-building ever since. That we may now see a true interpretation of it on the big screen has us trembling with delight.

Longtime fantasy fans like ourselves have always subscribed to the notion that the books were effectively unfilmable. Indeed, the um, not very good cartoon version of the late 1970s seemed to prove that. These days, though, technology seems to have advanced so much that what we should really have believed is that the books were unfilmable – until such time as special effects could really do justice to them. Now that computer graphics mean that one can, with the right skills, time and above all money, build any fantasy kingdom one likes, it seems that time has arrived.

HERE AT Games Workshop, as you may know, we have been fortunate to be allowed to design the official games of the film. However, the secretive nature of the project has been so tight that few of us have seen much of the film at all, and no one here has seen it all. So just like you, we're all just waiting for that opening day to experience what we fervently hope will be the film we always wanted to see.

For us in the Black Library, we hope that the films of *The Lord of the Rings* (two more to come after this one, don't forget!) will do more than just showcase Tolkien's

world. The whole fantasy genre can benefit from an increase in popularity and these films should be just the medium to do it. The Harry Potter books have already proved that general readers have a taste for the fantastical; now they're about to get a drop of the hard stuff and I suspect that many will be totally blown away.

Which may well mean that all good fantasy and science fiction will prove far more popular over the next few years, as new readers start with Tolkien and keep on exploring. The worlds of Warhammer are equally as rich and detailed as Middle-earth, and we'd certainly love to introduce ever more readers to their delights. Because who knows – one day someone may well want to make a film of *Gotrek & Felix*, or *Gaunt's Ghosts*, or *Eisenhorn*, or *Gilead*, or *Kage*, or one of our many other heroes. And then that would really have us buzzing with excitement. Hell, we would *burst*.

MARCO

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DEFIXIO

BY BEN COUNTER

'ORKS!' screamed someone over the radio, and the concussions of the first crude shells rang through the ground into the reeking, cramped interior of the Defixio. Samiel shouldered the massive weight of the sponson's heavy bolter and squinted through the vision slit. He could see nothing of the ambush, just wisps of smoke drifting in from the front of the convoy, but he could already hear the confusion of noise building up – broken voices over the comms, dull thuds from up ahead, and the Terminator crew around him getting to battle posts.

He was bad luck, they said. Samiel was beginning to think they were right.

'Crew, load up!' came Commander Karra-Vrass's voice over the rumble of the tracks and the ringing of explosions. Samiel glanced round to see Graek heaving the autocannon rounds into their chambers, gang tattoos rippling across his back. Above him, the skinny form of Damrid crammed itself into the turret gunner's chair.

'Defixio requesting target locations,' barked Karra-Vrass into the comms, but all he got was static shot through with screams. He turned back and shouted, over the noise of the Defixio's engines. 'Crew, I want targets, now! Light armour and infantry priority!'

There was a vast, terrible, crunching explosion and Samiel's vision was filled with an orange-white sheet of flame billowing towards him. He darted back from the sponson as a tongue of fire licked through the vision slit, his gas mask's intake suddenly choked with smoke and fumes. There was a hideous wrenching sound as Dniep gunned the engine and the Defixio ploughed through the wreckage of the shattered tank ahead of them.

'What the bloody hell was that?' bawled Karra-Vrass.

'Hellhound!' shouted back Samiel. 'They got Lucullo's Hellhound!' Burning bodies tumbled across the dark earth outside, and Samiel was thankful he couldn't hear them scream.

'Targets!' The voice was Damrid's, up in the turret, bringing the Defixio's autocannons to bear.

Kallin, on the opposite sponson, opened up and suddenly the Defixio's interior was full of the staccato battering of the heavy bolter's reports, hot shell casings everywhere. 'Come get some, ya groxlickin' sons a' bitches!'

Karra-Vrass swung open the front hatch and put his head out to see what was happening. When he came back down the side of his face was dark with soot. 'Get the halftrack!'

Samiel didn't hear over the din, but he knew that Damrid would be muttering a word to the Emperor, like he always did, just before the twin thunderclap of the autocannon blanked out the world for a split second.

All of Defixio's firepower was brought to bear on the orks apart from Samiel's sponson. He couldn't see the orks, and now thick smoke was sweeping across the valley from what must be half the convoy burning up ahead. It was choking the interior, too, but the crew barely noticed. Every breath a Chem-dog took was drawn through a respirator or jerry-built gasmask, and most of them were used to breathing stuff that could kill you.

Graek yanked the glowing-hot shells out of the breech and slammed another two home, and Kallin continued to fill the air with bursts of heavy bolter fire.

'Samiel, get me targets!' shouted Karra-Vrass. Unlike the other crew his voice was unimpaired by ugly implants or a gas mask – Savlar aristos didn't have such things because back home they breathed clean, imported air.

'Nothing, sir!' replied Samiel, and even as he said it a monstrosously crude jet intake sucked the smoke away and he was looking at the underside of the ugliest, squattest aircraft he had ever seen. It flew so low it must have clipped the vox aerial, sounding like a nuclear wind and followed by a score of rickety buggies, half-tracks and bikes crewed by insane greenskins, teeth bared and guns roaring. They barrelled down the side of the valley at astonishing speed and one of them slammed into the Defixio's side, so the tank slewed wildly and Samiel was thrown onto his back. Gunfire rattled along the Defixio's armour and Damrid swung the turret towards the horde.

Then, the roar of the dog-nosed fighter again as it spiralled down for another pass. This time cannon shells lanced down from above, ripped chunks out of the ground, and burst through Samiel's side of the Defixio like a hammer through glass. Samiel heard no noise, because the din had built up into a wall of white noise that filled his ears. Through the yawning hole in the tank's side he saw a swarming mass of greenskin maniacs sweeping down into the valley.

Samiel realised he had been blown clear across the tank's interior, and that Kallin's gun was still firing wildly even as the wall of white noise toppled over and everything went blank.



WHEN HE woke, all he saw was the grim grey sky of Jaegersweld. There was only one planet Samiel had seen uglier than this one, and that was Savlar itself. The Guard was supposed to be a way of getting off Savlar and the Dead Moons, with their chem-pits and convict-cities. All the Guard had done for him was drag him from planet to misbegotten planet, kill his friends, make him a jinx. Because he had been a sole survivor, he had used up more than his fair share of luck already and whoever had to serve with him next would have that little bit less luck to go round. Sole survivors were as unlucky as it got.

Still, he wasn't dead yet.

He sat up and felt the ache running down his limbs, and the sharp shots of pain where his skin had been hit by shrapnel. He took a breath of Jaegersweld's damp, unhealthy air, and heard the metallic sigh as it was forced through the implants inside his ribcage. Samiel's implants were more sophisticated than most, because those willing and able to work as administrators were worth keeping alive for longer than the average Chem-Dog. But the Guardsmen of the Savlar regiment, of course, had little respect for such skills.

They were towards the top of the valley slope. The Defixio stood nearby. The profile of an Exterminator-class battle tank was broken by all manner of salvaged and stolen bits Dniep had bolted on – armour plates, trophies, stowage. Kallin had tied a string of ork hands around his sponson mount, the freshest still glinting with moistness, the oldest shrivelled and rotted. The Savlar regimental marking were stencilled onto one side of the turret – on the other, splattered on in Dniep's loose hand, were the bold white letters that read DEFIXIO.

The tank had been sprayed in the drab brown-grey camouflage scheme common to everything on Jaegersweld, but the various shades of the bits and pieces bolted and tied on made it something very different from what must have rolled out of the factory on some far-flung forge world. Samiel was coming to realise that it was their tank now, their home and their protection as well as the weapon they were ordered to use. And because it was theirs, the crew made sure that in the process of repairing and maintaining it, they left it looking like it had been through its fair share of battles and firefights – they said almost everything had been replaced on the hulking vehicle, until it was almost entirely composed of what they had installed or repaired. The tank belonged to the crew far more than it belonged to the Imperial Guard, and that was just how the crew wanted it. Dniep himself was kneeling at the Defixio's other side and welding a huge sheet of salvaged metal over the hole in the side armour, which would become one more battle wound carried proudly like a badge of honour.

'Looks like all yer luck's used up after all.' Samiel looked up to see Kallin standing over him. Kallin was a big guy, tall and broad-shouldered, with skin so appallingly pitted and eroded by the constant rain of chemicals he had lived through that Samiel had seen healthier-looking corpses. The unsophisticated respirator implants under his jaw confirmed he had grown up in the chem-mines of the Dead Moons, which was a feat in itself. 'Miracle we made it this far, with a jinx.'

'Save it for the greenskins, Kallin.'

Kallin stooped down and pushed his ravaged face close. The ork bones hung round his neck jangled like wind chimes. 'You're a jinx, boy. One of them things sent down to plague us, like the greenskins ain't bad enough. Don't you start thinkin' we'll look out for you or miss you when you're dead. Graek's dead and we're on our way out, and it'll all because we went and took in a jinx.'

'Graek's dead?'

Kallin indicated the loader's body, laid out in the shade of a rock, one side of his torso dark red and swollen under the tattoos. 'Dead as they come. Busted all his ribs, turned his guts to groxfood. Like I said, miracle if any of us make it now. Jinx and a Guild boy, Emperor's teeth.' He saw Samiel's confused frown, and smiled with a mouthful of teeth stunted from inhaling acidic air. 'You didn't know about Karra-Vrass? You know that damn stick he carries?'

Samiel nodded. Karra-Vrass always carried a silver swagger stick, but Samiel had assumed it was just a gimmick, like other officers insisted on wearing full dress medals or parade swords.

'It's a badge of office. Made of titanium. He's not just any aristo, he's from the Guild. When he's not playing soldier with a tank full of us plebs, the bastard sits in orbit and sells the filth we churn out of the Dead Moons. People like him worked everyone I know near to death. Most of us aren't even cons, we're second generation or more, but they don't care. Long as they keep the trade going, we're just machines to make them creds. Used up Graek like he used up half the men on the Dead Moons.'

When Karra-Vrass approached with Damrid, Samiel couldn't help noticing the shining swagger-stick the officer still held in his hand. In the other was a salvaged visor-scope, just one of the pieces of 'non-standard' equipment that tended to turn up in any Chem-Dogs vehicle.

'We're not rejoining the convoy,' said Karra-Vrass.

'Why not?' asked Dniep, looking up from his hurried weld job.

'Because it's not there. We lost about three-quarters strength in that ambush, and the tail-end must have retreated. We can't hook up with them because our comms are out and the orks have us cut off.'

'Then what do we do?' said Kallin, quick to anger. 'Wait for a greenskin patrol to skin us alive?'

'The nearest regimental HQ is the Cadian 24th, fifteen hundred kilometres west.'

'Three days across ork-held land?'

'Exactly, Kallin. I wouldn't like to think you were questioning this course of action.'

Kallin muttered something under his breath that Samiel was glad he didn't quite catch.

'Now, crew,' continued Karra-Vrass, 'Since Samiel is back with us I think this is an appropriate time for a reading. Damrid?'

'Sir.' Damrid stepped forward, fishing a small prayer book from his ill-fitting fatigues. He began to speak of hope and duty, of how they were all sinners who wanted only to survive that they might redeem themselves in the Emperor's service. The words were familiar to Samiel, who had heard such things so often before in the chapels of the administrative colony where he had once lived. But he knew they were not meaningless, even if he had trouble believing them – devotion was the only thing keeping many Guardsmen sane. And even he, sometimes, found himself calling to the Emperor for help – especially when he fought his way out of a flaming wreck and felt the flames on his back as he leapt from the white-hot explosion behind him...

He was a sole survivor. Perhaps the Emperor had already heard him once, and wasn't ready to grant a miracle a second time. Maybe that was why he was supposed to be so unlucky.

Samiel and Damrid buried Graek's body quickly – orks were little more than animals, and they could home in on a spoiled corpse like any other beast. Samiel didn't object when Damrid rifled through his dead comrade's fatigues and pocketed the few trinkets and ammo rounds he found – he'd done the same himself, to friend and foe.

'Is it wrong...?' asked Damrid falteringly. 'Is it wrong to lose a fellow man and think we're better off without him?'

'I don't know,' replied Samiel. 'I didn't know him long.'

The last handful of damp earth was thrown over the dead man's face. 'You didn't want to. He was bad. The worst.'

'What did he do?' It wasn't a question that was generally asked of a Chem-Dog, for a man's crime was his own damn business. But Graek was dead, and he wasn't about to complain.

'A slaver. He ran with the... the unclean. Some Arbites tracked him down, but he found them first, and when he finished with them they say you couldn't tell they had ever been human.'

'And he never changed, that was the worst. He never saw the light. He never stopped hurting people. When we evacuated the civilians out of the south, he went missing for days, and after he came back we'd hear stories about families burned in bunkers and children hunted down for sport. They blamed it on the orks, but Graek had some... some things he kept. I think he was the worst sort of person.'

Samiel was grateful for an unhealthy shudder from the Defixio's engines as they kicked protesting into life. 'Dunno if they'll hold together,' Dniep was saying. 'Fuel's not a problem, you can run a Leman Russ on boot leather and bad language. But she took a big hit back there and the track drives are looking shaky.'

'Will it last?' Karra-Vrass's voice was dispassionate – he must have known that his life depended on the Defixio not breaking down, but he didn't sound like it.

Dniep stood up, wiping the oil off his hands onto his stained fatigues. 'Three days? Be surprised, sir. But then again, sometimes even I get surprised by how much punishment these things can take.'

'Good.' The officer raised his voice. 'Burial detail, are you finished?'

Damrid raised a hand. He had rolled up the sleeves of his fatigues and for the first time Samiel noticed something – a tattoo, a skull surrounded by barbed wire, with a barcode underneath, at the top of the boy's arm. It was one of the many symbols branded on the fresh convicts brought in to keep up the population of the Dead Moons, which meant that Damrid wasn't second generation like Samiel had assumed. He was a con. What had he done, this boy? You heard tales of kids slung into the chem-mines for stealing loaves of bread or failing to cheer when the planetary governor waved to the crowds. Poor lad. Life could be bad enough without being sentenced to a slow death when you were hardly old enough to know what right and wrong really were.

'And weaponry?'

'Loaded and ready,' came Kallin's voice from within the hull.

'Very well. The orks will have patrols out looking for survivors and we must not give them the chance to find us. We roll immediately.'

They clambered into the Defixio, Damrid into the turret to take the first lookout, with Karra-Vrass alongside Dniep at the front. Kallin and Samiel, meanwhile, slumped against the sponson mounts to catch some of the noisy, cramped downtime that passed for sleep on the move.



YOU CAN'T dream when you're not asleep, but it still felt like a nightmare. It wasn't that long ago it had happened, but he knew it would be burned across his mind's eye until he breathed his last. It was the reason he was on the Defixio at all, and the reason they all thought what only Kallin spoke – that Samiel was a jinx who had used up too much of his luck. His previous tank, an Executioner, had found itself surrounded and outnumbered by the light vehicles and bikes the greenskins rode like madmen.

He saw the billowing black-red of the fire and felt the heat across his face. He felt the cold earth against his back heating up as fuel spilled over the ground and rippled towards him, on fire.

He could see, as if they were in front of him right then, the silhouettes of his old crewmates, fire at their backs and orks at their front, blasting away with sidearms at their assailants. When the magazines had gone up from a lucky warbike shot the rear of the tank's hull had been torn off and Samiel had tumbled out while the burning wreck slid to a halt, and there his crewmates had made their stand.

Living on a planet like Savlar meant you valued every scrap of pride you scrounged, and the men who crewed the shattered tank weren't going to let themselves be taken prisoner by anyone or anything. Samiel watched as one was cut down by explosive shellfire, another ground beneath the wheels of a warbike that slewed insanely close.

And then the plasma coils went critical. An expanding globe of white-hot energised plasma, like a new star, incinerated the crewmen and burned a hole in the ork attack.

When the smoke cleared and the bodies were recovered, Samiel was the only one alive. His injuries were minor, and the orks hadn't even noticed him in the confusion. He heard them all say he was the luckiest Guardsmen on the planet.

But they weren't smiling when they said it.



'NO USE, SIR. Goes as far as I can see.' Samiel snapped out of his half-sleep, and once more he was back inside the stale hull of the Defixio. He knew something was wrong because the tank was only moving slowly now, and Karra-Vrass was replacing Damrid at the turret hatch.

Damrid dropped down onto the floor.

'What's happening?' asked Kallin, also jolted out of his own half-dreams.

'Minefield,' came the reply, and Samiel realised it was probably the worst possible answer. orks made no attempt to conceal their minefields, but they laid a hell of a lot and didn't care if they lost a couple of their own to them, meaning the fields were always big with no way through. They also had a habit of packing them with so much explosive they left craters the size of command bunkers – current Guard wisdom was that the orks laid mines more because they liked the noise than for any strategic advantage.

Karra-Vrass came back down and pulled a folded-up map from inside his greatcoat. He laid it out on the floor – it showed the northern part of the continent across which the Defixio was trying to travel. Samiel saw just how far they had to go, and how much of the ground they had to cover was covered in the green markers of known ork camps and outposts. Karra-Vrass stabbed at the map with the end of his swagger stick. 'Dniep, is this our position?'

'Near enough.'

Between the Defixio and the Cadian HQ lay a plain bounded by contours – in the world outside, those contours were ragged, torn ranges of loose earth and landslides. No kind of country for a tank.

'The minefield will have no safe channels, and the high ground is not an option. However, the field is not particularly deep. Defusing is possible.'

Everyone looked at Dniep. He had a knack with anything technical – Samiel had heard tell of the miracles he had worked with the stubborn Leman Russ engines, and no doubt he could have taught the Tech-Guard Engineers a thing or two about clearing mines. 'I could do it,' he said, with an uncharacteristic bravery that made Samiel realise just how desperate a situation they were in.

'What about patrols?' said Kallin. 'We'd be waiting here for hours, the bloody greenskins could pick us off for fun.'

'Dniep could stay.' It was Damrid who spoke – by now all the crew were crowded around the map. 'If someone marked the mines first, he'd defuse them in half the time. We'd have a driver in case we got jumped. He'd have to go out and clear a path afterwards, but not for as long. We'd

still be targets, but we'd have a better chance.'

'And we'd leave a man behind if we had to run for it,' added Kallin grimly.

Karra-Vrass began folding up the map. 'We're not leaving anyone. But we may find ourselves in a firefight a man short. We're already down a loader.'

'So, who do we need the least?' said Dniep.

And this time, they looked at Samiel.



IT WAS DARK by then. Jaegersweld had two moons, one large and bright, but its light was filtered through many layers of ever-present cloud and a sickly, grey glow fell over the landscape. The minefield was obvious enough – some explosive-packed devices stuck above the ground, more of a challenge than a trap. But while they might have been animals, orks were a very cunning type of animal. They would have some buried so you couldn't see them, and those were the ones Samiel would have to spend a long time marking so Dniep's foray would be as short as possible.

Samiel told himself it could be done – it wasn't far across. And it certainly had to be done, for the loose, muddy hills on either side would be near-impossible for the Defixio to clamber across, even with Dniep at the controls.

Hopping down from the front hatch, Samiel was acutely aware of just how exposed he was. Outside the tank, he felt soft and vulnerable. Inside the tank he was on home ground, a tiny bubble of the Imperium around him. Now he was behind ork lines, and alone. He checked his gear – flare gun, bayonet (another of Dniep's 'finds'), a bag of spent shell casings to mark the mines.

It wasn't slow work, but there were a lot of mines, densely packed to make the huge chain explosions the orks liked so much. He looked up every now and again to check for glints of approaching machinery against the grey-black horizon, and listened for the juddering drone of an ork engine. Once or twice he heard the chatter of gunfire far off,

but that might mean anything in a ork warzone – they could be launching a major assault or just taking pot shots at one another for fun.

That they were so difficult to predict was the worst thing, because you couldn't just herd them into killing zones or cripple their economic base or any of the other things that worked with good old-fashioned humans. The only thing that worked was hatred. There was no sympathy, no honour. You had to exterminate them, all of them, because they were seemingly designed to spring up again at the slightest chance. Samiel knew that war against the orks would never end – even if they were wiped of the surface of Jaegersweld, the Guard would just be packed off to the next planet that became infested, and it would begin all over again. For Samiel, it had become a case of getting out alive and hoping that some distant commander would grant him a plot on a conquered planet as reward for a lifetime of fighting, so he could let someone else do all the hating. But if he really had used up all his luck already, as the others suspected, then he didn't fancy his odds.

The sound that alerted him was the squeal of metal on metal as the Defixio's turret turned to face something he couldn't see. Samiel looked around him – he was more than halfway across the minefield by now, a long trail of shell casings marking the hidden mines. The Defixio was too far away – if he ran for it now it would probably move before he got there and he'd be left standing full in view of whatever was attacking. He obeyed the first rule of the Imperial Guard, and kept his damn head down.

The autocannon fired and an explosion bloomed some way off. A group of vehicles was illuminated for the briefest moment – bikes, huge clunking things like battering rams on wheels with speeds limited only by the insanity of their riders.

orks. They had been found, and now the greenskins were moving in for the kill. They were crazy, these bikers, but they were as dangerous as it got for a tank – they carried the crudest of explosives which could crack open a Leman Russ with ease. Samiel had seen it done. And now it was going to be done to the Defixio.

The red-hot exhausts and muzzle flashes were visible now as the bikers careered down the valley at tremendous speed, and the Defixio was moving. It was heading the only way it could – towards the nearest ridge of surely impassable ground. Karra-Vrass was gambling on the tiny chance that the Defixio might make it, because the other chances were the minefield and the approaching orks, and those odds were worse still.

It wouldn't make it. No way. Kallin's sponson chattered away at long range at the bikes, and after a worryingly long wait (Damrid must be having to load it himself, thought Samiel, remembering Graek's shattered ribs) the autocannon fired again. Two bikes tumbled flaming to a standstill, but the others sheared through their wreckage and stayed on course.

The Defixio was at the foot of the ridge and began to climb, the loose earth already slipping under its tracks. The tank wouldn't have outrun the bikes at the best of times and now it was slower still, hauling itself painfully up the crumbling slope as the bikes roared around it, sweeping towards its near side. Samiel's sponson fired and the closest bike's front wheel was shredded, flipping the bike over and sending the ork rider somersaulting into the Defixio's side. Samiel realised that Karra-Vrass himself must be manning the gun.

The officer's aim was good but there were only so many rounds he could squeeze off, and the lead biker threw a grenade, fuse sparkling, at the tracks as he slewed past. The explosion was loud even from where Samiel was lying, and he saw links of track flying. Three more followed as the bikers passed, Karra-Vrass's gun still firing but blindly through smoke and shrapnel.

Samiel knew they didn't think much of him – in fact, they would probably have preferred one less gunner than a sole survivor and the misfortune he brought. But they were still his comrades, and they were still soldiers of the Imperium up against aliens. He couldn't just let them die.

He stood up, pulling one of the flares out of his bag, and lit it. When his eyes adjusted to the sudden glare he saw the lead biker had spotted the flash in the darkness and was wheeling in Samiel's direction, the others following.

Samiel considered dropping the flare and running – but ork mines were unstable and the weight of a man would set even the tankbusters off. His heart, already racing, quickened further when he realised that the safest thing he could do was stand his ground and face the bikers' charge.

'Come on, you green bastards! Come and get some!' he yelled over the roar of the bikes engines.

It was probably the bravest thing he had ever done. Probably the last, too. Would anyone survive to tell the story of how he died? Could the crew in the Defixio even see what was happening? Samiel couldn't think of an answer because his mind was full of the bikes screaming towards him. He could see the lead bikers' bared teeth in the light from the flare, see the pinpricks of white in its tiny piggy eyes and the blur of the front wheel...

It was some way into the minefield when it careened straight into an anti-vehicle mine so scappily made it stuck out of the ground half the height of a man. The noise was so vast Samiel was totally deafened, and a column of earth burst out of the ground. An instant later a huge chain explosion erupted with such force Samiel felt himself picked off his feet as the concussion hammered over him. He slammed onto the ground, breath knocked out of him, mind reeling, the whole world a swirling madness of white noise and explosions.

When the noise subsided and he opened his eyes, he saw the air thick with smoke coiling from a rip in the ground longer than the skid from a dropship crash. The wan moonlight made strange shifting shapes in the smoke, and the smell of burnt fuel was dizzying. A bike wheel, licked with flame, rolled slowly along the ground.

By the Emperor, thought Samiel, I'm alive.

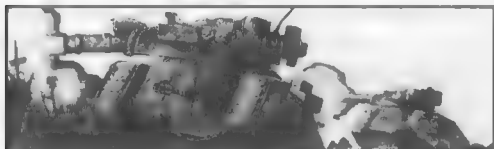
I can't believe it. I'm alive.

Through his near-deafness he caught the ragged sound of an engine gunning and the smoke parted to reveal the last biker, blackened and battered with blood-flecked teeth bared, clinging to his bike as it tore towards Samiel through the blast zone. Samiel acted on reflex – he lashed out his gun and fired. It was then that he realised he was armed only with the flare gun.

The sparkling white flare spiralled towards the bike and shattered against the handlebars like a firework, leaving an incandescent comet trail as the bike hurtled forward. Samiel could see the ork's manic grin and the wicked squinting eyes behind its goggles, and knew he was going to die.

There was a massive wash of heat as the bike took off at the last second in a ball of flame, somersaulting over him and cartwheeling across the plain. The rider was thrown off, on fire, further into the minefield – Samiel covered his head just in time to protect himself from the inevitable shower of debris from another detonating mine.

Samiel watched as the flames guttered out. For the second time in half a minute he was quite astonished to be alive. He lay back on the ground, suddenly exhausted, and got his first real sleep for months.



‘YOU ARE ONE lucky bitch, Chem-Dog.’ The voice was Dniep’s. It was morning, and the sun was flooding the dank valleys of Jaegersweld with drab grey light. Samiel felt he was propped up against the slope. He was aching again, but mostly unhurt.

‘Them greenskin bastards cleared us a path,’ continued Dniep. ‘And that last one, you must’ve caught his fuel tank. Went up like a flare shell, saw it from here. Even Kallin was impressed.’

Samiel looked across to the minefield – there was indeed a scar running right across it, plenty wide enough for the Defixio.

Dniep scratched at the acned skin around his throat implants – he had escaped the worst ravages of the chem-mines because he had been too useful fixing the machines to risk at the workface, but he was still damned ugly. ‘So you solved us one problem, Samiel, but now we got us another.’ He indicated the hulk of the Defixio, smoke still coiling off it. The tracks on the near side had been unpinned and lay limp on the ground. ‘We found enough links, but a coupla pins got sheared. Scavved one soon enough, but we can’t find another. Not for the life of us. And it’ll

be our lives, too,’ cause we’re stuck out here in the open with a tank that won’t move and a bunch of greenskins wondering why their mates haven’t come back.’

‘You should have woken me, I could have helped...’

‘Karra-Vrass said to let you sleep. And didn’t none of us argue with him, neither. Besides, we’re not going to find it. We need something thin enough to fit but strong enough to take the strain. Miracle we found one.’

But Samiel went out and looked anyway. It wasn’t that he dared have any real hope – he just couldn’t lie there and wait. The orks would come, he knew, because they had a knack for being everywhere on a planet at once, and many Guardsmen swore greenskins could hunt a man down by scent alone. He kept low and always checked the horizon for approaching orks, once or twice spotting something dark and moving and hitting the ground until he was sure it was gone. And, as he expected, there was nothing that might serve as a track pin half-buried in Jaegersweld’s heavy earth, just metal fit only for scrap. There was no hope, but he didn’t allow himself be consumed with the knowledge that he would die. Many a time he had heard better Guardsmen than him discover how slight their chances were, then shrug their shoulders and reply that hell, a man’s gotta die somehow.

Nevertheless his steps were heavy and his head low as he clambered back over the ridge. And the sound he heard was engines.

He hurried down the loose slope to see the Defixio warmed up and ready to roll, smoke pumping from inefficient exhausts, trinkets and grisly trophies shaking with the unhealthy vibrations of the cylinders.

The front hatch went up and Kallin looked out. There were a few more scavenged trinkets around his neck and hanging from his various ammo belts and pouches – a Chem-Dog out foraging always came back with some new toys. ‘Samiel, ya grox-lover! Get in!’

Samiel sprinted the last few yards and climbed in – the rest of the crew had been waiting for him. With a nod from Karra-Vrass, Dniep gingerly backed the Defixio off the slope. Then, it turned and headed

across the wide channel across the minefield, towards the other side of the plain and the Cadian HQ beyond.

Samiel didn't ask what had been used as a track pin. Probably the axle off an abandoned ork vehicle, or even a direct replacement from another wrecked Leman Russ tank, of which there must be some lying around.

And then he realised that Karra-Vrass was no longer carrying his titanium swagger stick.



SAMIEL'S TURN at the lookout came. The last day had been nervous but hopeful – they had hidden under an overhang when a flight of smoking ork flyers swooped overhead, and often lurked behind ridges and rock formations as ork patrols passed close by. Karra-Vrass had told them they were being hunted by orks eager to remove such an impertinent threat as a tank that dared run their gauntlet, and the hunters were closing in. But they had not been spotted, and time was on their side, because they were nearing their destination.

'Maybe you're not as unlucky as you look, Samiel,' Kallin had said, which were probably the most charitable words he had uttered in his life.

And now they had to cross one last hill before the Cadian HQ was in sight. There would be some explaining to do – where had they come from? Why were they alone? Where was the rest of the column? The Cadians would certainly make a point of packing away anything small and valuable whenever the Chem-Dogs approached. But they would be able to eat, maybe sleep, pull a few days light duties before someone figured out how to get them back to the Savlar regiment. Samiel didn't fancy the Defixio to make it, with a half-busted track and a hole in the side, especially since a constant supply of Leman Russ spares was always required. The Cadians would probably break the old Exterminator up and use the bits to patch up their own vehicles in the motor pool. But even Dniep thought it was a better end

than a smouldering wreck in the middle of a planet no one really cared about.

And now they were at the crest of the hill, the flats beyond rolling out before Samiel's eyes, the Cadian HQ finally coming into view...

A grinning, lopsided horned skull totem, cut from sheets of metal and bolted together, stood on the roof of the command bunker. Burned-out Leman Russ and Chimeras littered the compound. A Hydra flak cannon stood idle at one corner, pointing down and inwards, barrels still blackened from the fire it had poured into the attackers streaming through the breaches. Bodies of men and orks lay in piles around the centres of the heaviest fighting – the breach, the gateway, the mess and barracks complex where the men had made their stand. Where the fuel dump had been was a charred crater ringed with corpses. Buildings and bunkers had been turned inside-out by demo charges, their contents – furniture, equipment, occupants – strewn across the ground. Those structures still standing bore scars around windows and doors that had been used as fire points. Bodies in Cadian fatigues were displayed entwined in the razor wire that topped the rings of barricades and fences. Everywhere were bullet scars, discarded weapons, and the dead. Especially the dead.

But the worst was outside. All around the HQ was a teeming city of tents and huts, brimming with greenskins. They fought, argued, divided the spoils and feasted on the supplies they had hauled out of the HQ's stores. The mad bikers that had so taken to Jaegersweld's landscape were buzzing like flies around the camp, eagerly burning captured fuel in pursuit of the blind speed they lived for. Camp fires smouldered, and the breeze brought the reek of burning and filth.

'Can you see it?' called out Damrid from below.

'Stop,' said Samiel.

The Defixio ground to a halt. Damrid was the first out, scrambling over the turret seat and pushing his head out of the hatch.

'Imperator...' he whispered, one hand held to the pocket in which he carried his prayer book. 'Xenos malefica...what about forgiveness? Hasn't it been enough?'

Damrid slithered back into the Defixio's hull. Dniep replaced him, eager to see what had caused such shock in his crewmate.

'Those bastards,' he said when he saw. 'Alien bastards. We shoulda known.'

Samiel didn't know what to say. What can you say, when even what little hope a Guardsman allows himself is torn away?

'So that's what broke the lad,' continued Dniep, more to himself than to Samiel. 'He thought he was forgiven, he really did. That's why he never called you bad luck, like the rest of us. The Emperor was watching, he thought, because he had been forgiven.'

'For what?'

Dniep looked at him incredulously. 'No one told you? Damrid's the worst! I mean, I did fixin' for some pretty rough types, and a few people got hurt, and but I never...' Dniep shook his head. 'The lad was on a frontier world, raising hell since he was born. When they sent a mission to tame the place, Damrid and his boys took exception. You know his prayer book? Used to belong to a Sister there. They say that as Damrid was hacking the poor bitch to pieces all she could say was: "He will forgive you. He will forgive you." over and over. Threw her to the cudbears when they'd finished with her. He started reading the damn book on the prison ship, and by the time he got to the Dead Moons he got it into his head he was forgiven.'

Damrid? It didn't make any sense... but then, sometimes there was a desperation about the way he believed, as if his faith was his only chance and he had to hold onto it no matter what... 'He doesn't look like he went through the Dead Moons.'

'They kept him safe. A chaplain who believes, that's the rarest thing in the system. Worth keeping alive. And when the Guard said they were raising up another Chem-Dog regiment, he was first in line, ready to fight the Emperor's fight and smite the foes of Humanity.' Dniep shook his head and whistled at the sight of the orks running wild across the Cadian HQ, making belts of skin and necklaces of hands. 'And now this. He should've made it. Really should've. Kid like him, just getting through it all without breaking up, that's like winning the war on your own.'

When they had all looked upon the remains of the Cadian HQ and its slaughtered garrison, they slumped down inside the Defixio and were silent.

Suddenly Kallin slammed a fist into the side of the hull. 'For this we fight? We drag this lump of metal across a whole damned bitch of a planet and this is what we get?'

They all looked at him, and Samiel wished he would stay quiet, but like the rest of them Kallin had felt hope building up during the journey's last leg and he couldn't cope with having it torn away from him. His voice was rising to a screech. 'Why now? Why couldn't they take the place a month earlier, or a month later, or any time but now? They can't... what happened? Can't these damn Cadians even look after their own HQ?'

Kallin slumped, suddenly exhausted. Dniep spoke weakly, his voice cracking. 'The Jurn regiment is supposed to be south, past the gulf. If we can get down there, and cross it...'

'No.' Karra-Vrass's voice was strong. That was why he was an officer, thought Samiel grimly. He was as broken as the rest of them, but he could conceal it. 'We would be passing through the ork drop sites. When we are found here we will be executed quickly, for we are on the frontier and prisoners would use up too many supplies. If we break for the south we will be imprisoned, enslaved, probably used as playthings, and then we will die anyway. And the gulf cannot be crossed, there have been enough prisoners that have tried.'

'So what then?' Kallin's voice was like a child's. Samiel was almost sure he was weeping. 'We die?'

Karra-Vrass looked at him. 'We die.'

'But then, everybody dies.' Samiel realised that he was the one speaking.

'The truest of things,' replied Karra-Vrass. 'All lives end.'

'So it is willed,' said Damrid. His face was pale as a dead man's and he had a faraway expression. It was said a man could gain a place at the Emperor's side by his conduct when all seemed lost, for even in the moments of the most terrible desperation, He was watching, He was judging. This was Damrid's last chance. If he died well, maybe that would mean he'd be forgiven, after all.

‘But how many know when their time comes?’ continued Karra-Vrass. ‘How many can see the end coming, and be prepared? Not many. Of all those of our brothers-in-arms who died, only we can ready ourselves. It is in death, more than anything, that a man can be measured. Isn’t that right, Damrid?’

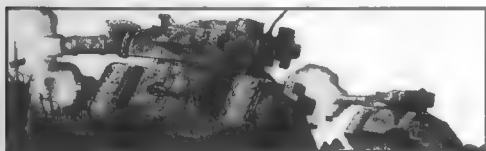
‘So it is willed,’ said the boy again.

‘Their patrols will catch up with us within the hour. Their camp sentries will be onto us long before that. We have not much time, but it will be enough. We have been given the greatest gift that any man could ask, for now we have a purpose. We will spend the rest of our lives battling the alien foe, not because we are ordered or because we must, but because we choose to do so, to make our deaths mean something. It could be otherwise – we could die in flight, or cowering, or under the slaver’s whip. But we will not.’

Samiel looked up. It shouldn’t mean anything, for still they were all dead men. But somehow, it did. They could butcher his friends, strip away his hopes, wage a war that forced him to spend his life in exhaustion or fear cooped up in a tank on a planet he hated. They could turn him into no better than a bad seed. But by the Emperor himself, those Greenksins bastards couldn’t make him die for nothing.

He was on his feet, shivering with excitement and pride. Karra-Vrass stood, too, and smoothed out the creases in his greatcoat.

‘Crew, load up,’ he said.



EVERY SAVLAR vehicle was equipped with hermetic seals around the hatches and doors – these they sealed, so that even breathing the same air as the Chem-Dog crew would be a privilege the orks would have to fight for. Karra-Vrass took off his officer’s greatcoat, rolled up the black sleeves of his uniform, and slammed two autocannon shells home into the breech. Damrid calmly recited those hymns that meant the most to him – the ones about never despairing, because every

good man has his place in His plan, even if that man in his humility knows it not.

Karra-Vrass checked his sidearm, a duelling pistol that somehow he had managed to keep hold of even though its ivory handle and fine workmanship would have caught the eye of the most honest Chem-Dog. The others did the same with weapons they had as trophies or charms – Kallin’s ugly snub-nosed gun looted from a dead ork, a shotgun Dniep hid under the driver’s seat, a rusted sergeant’s sword Damrid had kept. A rummage through the Defixio’s gear produced an old but working laspistol, which Samiel took.

This is the last gift I will ever receive, he thought. It felt like the first.

They did not have long to wait. As darkness approached once again, a greenskin foot patrol approached from the camp. Perhaps fifty strong, they stalked low in the gathering gloom, led by one a head or two taller than the rest, one arm hacked off and replaced with a brutal three-fingered claw that spat sparks from a power field. They had axes, guns, clubs.

Kallin whispered sharply to Karra-Vrass – from his vision slit, he could see one of the bike patrols that had been hunting them approaching fast from the opposite direction. They were trapped.

Good, thought Samiel. If you’ve got to go, then this is the way to do it.

Karra-Vrass glanced up at Damrid. The lad nodded back.

‘Fire,’ said Karra-Vrass.

The twin explosions burst in the midst of the orks, blasting two or three to flailing limbs. Some tried to scatter but the leader grabbed a couple by the scruffs of their necks, flung them forward, pointed with his monstrous claw and bellowed a command that could only be the charge.

They ran forward brandishing their weapons. Samiel heard Karra-Vrass roll the smoking casings out of the breech and haul another two shells in, as strongly and smoothly as Graek had done.

‘Range?’ called the officer, voice strained with the effort of forcing the breech cover home.

‘Close!’ shouted back Damrid.

‘Fire!’

The two blasts merged into one as a hole was torn out of the advancing patrol. Some were thrown forward to collide with their fellows in the front, and two of them were thrown into the air in bits. Samiel took the opportunity – slowed down and in disarray, the leader cracking two heads together to stop his troops from fleeing, the patrol was a fine target. He opened up with his heavy bolter, seeing orks stitched through with explosive shells, illuminated in the muzzle flare. Two or three more went down, and the charge was halted. Now Dniep crunched the gears and the Defixio turned towards the orks. Samiel kept firing, keeping ork heads down, and he could hear the wet crunch of greenskins going under the Defixio's tracks.

Kallin was already firing on his side, meaning the bikers were almost upon them. The foot patrol blazed away with every chance they were given, and shells were impacting fiercely on the Defixio's hull. The noise was appalling, for the orks liked their weapons loud – but Samiel didn't care. They could make all the noise they wanted, they weren't taking down these Dead Moon scummers without the hardest fight of their lives. His heavy bolter roared with the defiance he felt boiling inside him, and another ork was run through on a lance of hot steel.

There was a sound like a thundercrack as a crude ork grenade went off, buckling the metal patching the hull at Samiel's side. Shells ricocheted off the edge of Samiel's vision slit, but he didn't flinch. His ammo belt was running out and Karra-Vrass rammed another one into the heavy bolter's breech. Samiel glanced at him in gratitude, saw the officer understood, and went back to firing. He could barely see the targets now, his vision was full of a heaving press of green flesh as the orks tried to swamp the Defixio.

Another grenade went off and Kallin swore, his heavy bolter torn off its mounting by the explosion. Without pausing he grabbed his ork gun and opened fire at the talons clawing at the breached hull. Samiel could hear the bikes now, even above the rest of the din, as the riders dismounted and added their weight to the assault.

There was shriek of metal and suddenly the Defixio was open to the sky – the lead ork was standing over them, power claw holding the turret he had just ripped clean off the tank. Damrid tumbled back down into the hull, grabbed the sword and began to hack at the green arms and heads that appeared over the edge of ragged metal. Kallin's side gave way seconds later and he was fighting back the encroaching greenskins with his bare hands, ammo expended.

One of the greenskins got Dniep, an axe swinging down and burying itself in his back. Karra-Vrass opened fire with his duelling pistol, each shot hitting home, and Samiel followed suit, laspistol bolts burning into green skin. He heard Kallin yelling obscenities as he was dragged through the hole in the hull by a dozen clawed hands, and Samiel felt sure Kallin would have wanted to go out swearing.

The massive ork reached down and grabbed Damrid in its claw, hoisting him clean out of the tank, shearing through the boy's skinny body, tossing him aside, roaring its rage and showing its huge fangs. Karra-Vrass grabbed an autocannon shell and rammed it into the monster's mouth with the strength of a man who knows he has run out of time. The ork swiped at him with the power claw, batting him aside, and shots from the swarming orks tore into the officer's torso.

Samiel snatched up Dniep's discarded shotgun. He could feel the greenskins all around him, teeth biting into his legs, claws sinking into his shoulders. But there was no pain, not at the end, not while he still had his mark to make.

He fired a single round from the shotgun, aimed right into the face of the immense ork leader. With a roar like the end of the world the autocannon shell lodged in its jaw detonated, blowing the beast's head clean off, tearing a huge chunk out of its monstrous body. It swayed, as if it hadn't realised it was dead – then it fell.

Knowing that that he had died giving as good as he had got, his heart pumping sheer glory through his veins, Samiel fell under the heaving mass of greenskins and felt no more.

‘YOU’RE A LUCKY swine,’ said the voice. It wasn’t Savlar – the accent was different. ‘Well enough to talk?’

‘Just.’ Samiel was surprised to hear his own voice replying. He opened his eyes – Jaegersweld’s sunlight was never very bright, but he still squinted after so long...

Asleep? Unconscious? Dead?

The shadow in front of him became the shape of a man. A lined face and grey hair, dressed in Cadian fatigues. A colonel, Samiel saw from the chevrons on his shoulder.

‘You mind telling me what happened here, son?’

‘Ran into some orks, sir.’ Samiel could hardly believe he was speaking. He had thought he must be dead before, twice... but this time he had been certain. He had been there waiting for it, and when it came he faced it and refused to let it take him without a fight.

He struggled into a sitting position. Behind the colonel was the smoking shell of the Defixio. He wouldn’t have recognised it as a tank at all had he not spent the last, greatest moments of its life inside it. Skeletons surrounded it, just as charred. The massive jawbones and beetling craniums of orks were everywhere, with a couple of human skulls that once belonged to his comrades.

‘Took a lot of them with you. Must’ve thought you were dead, eh?’

‘I was sort of counting on it, sir.’

‘Like I said, one lucky swine. Fuel tanks went up and threw you clear. Week or two with the Sisters in the field hospital and you’ll be back in action.’ The colonel looked over Samiel’s tattered fatigues, and the gas mask that hung round his neck. ‘You from Savlar?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Steal anything and we’ll hang you.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Samiel could sit up but he couldn’t walk – one leg was busted so bad he couldn’t feel it. As he was loaded onto a stretcher he could see the rest of the Cadians clearing up the debris of the ork camp they had overrun in recapturing their HQ. The ork totem was being taken down from the roof of the command bunker,

and the bodies lined up in mass graves.

Nothing Karra-Vrass had said was true. His friends (they were his friends in those final hours, without a doubt) had died no better deaths than the hundreds of Cadians had days earlier, or the poor souls killed when the convoy was hit. They hadn’t achieved anything, not really – the war on Jaegersweld would carry on without them. The Imperium was exactly the same as it would have been had none of them ever lived.

But that wasn’t the point. They felt they were achieving something in death. Even Karra-Vrass believed his own words, of that Samiel was sure. They believed they were dying for a cause, they had been allowed to confront their deaths head-on and not have it finding them without warning as they cowered alone. How many Guardsmen on Jaegersweld could say that? It was a terrible place, this galaxy, that ate up the lives of men. But sometimes, there was hope. Sometimes, there was something you could salvage from it, some dignity and pride, even if it was right at the end. It was more than most men got in the Guard, or on the Dead Moons, or anywhere else.

Samiel couldn’t properly understand it himself. But the crew of the Defixio had won a fine and noble victory of their own.

Now, of course, Samiel was a sole survivor twice over, and it would be a miracle if anyone would ever so much as look at him without muttering something dark under their breaths about how that man had used up enough luck for a hundred men. But there were worse things. In fact, he had something to be proud of – he had died a total of three times now, and two of those were pretty good send-offs. That wasn’t a bad strike rate.

The Cadians began to carry him back to the HQ compound, through the wreckage of the ork camp. One of the stretcher-bearers glanced round at him, and must have wondered why, when he had a shattered leg and every one of his friends was dead, all this crazy Savlar kid could do was smile to himself. ♣



MEAT & BONE

By Robin D. Laws

PILED HIGH, the corpses formed a bloody ridge. Arms and legs, some broken, others twisted, jutted out from the heap. Thickening blood dripped down from the uppermost bodies, running down mud-spattered faces and spreading through the fabric of tunics and leggings. It was early yet, and the stench of rotting had yet to rise up and overcome that of emptied bladders and evacuated bowels. The sky was red from distant fires. Crows cawed. Flies buzzed, ready to lay eggs, which would pop forth as maggots, which would feed, which would grow into flies, which would buzz elsewhere, to find more meat for more maggots.

Angelika crept quickly but carefully forward, watching where each foot fell. It would be no good slipping in the mud, or hearing that awful, telltale slurking noise that informed you you'd just got your boot stuck. The orcs who'd fallen upon these soldiers and slaughtered them would have mostly moved on by now, having sorted through the corpses for weapons and armor pieces, the only varieties of loot they had any use for. But there could always be stragglers. Or her fellow looters. Angelika's profession was not an elevated one, and you could never trust someone you met out here not to slit your throat for the trinkets you'd mined. You did not want to fall down or get stuck or become in any way distracted.

Angelika Fleischer had blacked the pale skin of her cheeks and forehead with soot, to make herself harder to see from a distance. She was tall and her limbs were long. Raggedly cut locks of hair jutted from the top of her narrow, sharply symmetrical head. The irises of her eyes were dark, so much so that it was hard to distinguish them from the pupils. These unrevealing eyes sat high in her face, above imperious, down-sloping cheekbones. Her lips were thin and precise. A short, thin line of white scar tissue fissured from the right corner of her mouth, marring the icy perfection of her beauty. She wore neither earrings, nor necklace, nor rings on her fingers. Her tunic and leggings were of brown leather that had worn so soft it seemed at first glance like deerskin. They were stained in many places, and crisscrossed with rudely sewn patches and repairs. Both garments were immodestly tight, though she had

draped a short skirt of gauzy rags around her waist. In this land, it was hard enough, and you did not want to give men in the taverns any further reason for annoying catcalls, which drew attention. The sleeves of her tunic clung tight to her arms, and ended in frayed cuffs several inches before her wrists. Gloves protected her palms, though she'd snipped away their fingers and thumbs, to leave her own bare and free to work.

Work she did. She knelt down over a stray body, one the orcs had not tossed into the pile. It was hard to make out colours, with all the gore and mud, so she couldn't guess the man's origin or regiment. But from the cuff-frills, you could tell he was an officer. The breastplate was already long gone, so it was an easy thing for her to reach down and pluck off each carved ivory, gold-rimmed button, one, then the next, then the next. Angelika tucked the resultant handful of buttons into the soft leather pouch that hung from her belt. She yanked open the tunic to see if the man had a ransom wrapped around his chest – perhaps a money belt, or thin strands of gold. But no. She scuttled backwards to grab the heel of his left boot. For some reason, if it was in the boot, it would nearly always be in the left one. She wiggled the heel and twisted and wriggled and worked it off. In the handful of years Angelika had been making her living as a looter of battlefields, she had become very good at getting boots off. There, wrapped around his ankle, she saw a necklace of pearls and silver. She snatched it up and tightened her fingers around it.

An exhalation of breath, made visible by the air's increasing chill, rose up from one of the bodies in front of her. Someone was not quite dead. Angelika halted herself in mid-gesture, with the stillness of a hunted animal, her face remaining expressionless. Her eyes methodically scanned the tangle of corpses ahead of her. She saw the man who was still breathing. Heard him groan: a low, weak grunt. It spoke to Angelika of fear and disappointment. His throat was slick with bright-colored blood and, as Angelika studied him further, she saw his tunic was also soaked through with red. He gurgled and his chest jerked slightly upwards.

Angelika looked slowly around and moved towards him, gingerly finding solid footfalls in the few spaces the carpet of corpses offered. She squatted beside the man. His face was wide, his beard bushy and gray. The veins of his face lay close to the surface of his skin, mapping a lifetime of drained ale flagons. His right eye was pale blue. A black leather patch, studded with agates and with an opal in the middle, covered the left. She could easily tell he was a veteran campaigner.

His living eye registered the sight of the woman kneeling over him, and he tried to reach a fleshy arm up at her. But strength had left him, and it sank back into the muck the moment he tried to raise it. He groaned again, making a sound that seemed to Angelika fretful, almost babyish.

'Not me,' he said.

'Yes,' Angelika said, but gently, 'you.'

She put the fingers of her right hand together and moved them slowly towards his face. She lay them softly against his left cheek. She felt the wet of the blood and the soft tangle of matted beard hair. She felt the coarser stubble on the part of his cheek the dying man usually shaved.

'Not-' the veteran said, but then he deflated, and Angelika saw that his one good eye had gone blank. It wasn't so unusual to find soldiers who hadn't finished dying yet, especially against orcs. They were less than thorough with their defeated foes. After a human victory, you found most corpses stripped of obvious valuables, which was bad, but you faced less chance that the man you were searching would suddenly bolt up and clamp bloodied hands around your throat. It was a different set of complications, depending on which side won.

She broke from her stillness and reached over to snatch the jeweled eye-patch from the dead man's face. She tucked it into her purse's wide, waiting mouth. She checked his tunic for buttons but they were nothing special. He'd spent all his vanity coin on the fancy patch, clearly. She half-straightened herself, casting her eyes about for an officer type. They were always the most lucrative.

She heard another groan, behind her, and turned. A long, thin dagger was already in her hand. She saw nothing moving. Just the big ridge of piled bodies. She watched a plume of breath escape from her lips up into the air.

'Please,' a voice said. A young voice, male. Speaking the tongue of the Empire. It was not the kind of trick a brutish orc was capable of playing.

Angelika remained still, kept her blade out.

'Please,' the voice repeated. 'Over here,' it said.

Angelika's eyes went to where the voice seemed to be coming from, but her feet remained planted in place.

'Please,' the voice said. 'I am stuck under bodies. Whenever I open my mouth, it fills up with blood. Someone else's, I am pretty sure. Help me get out. Please.'

Angelika knew the Empire, and in a past existence had learned to tell one accent from another. The young man's voice came from somewhere up in the north-east. A long way from where they stood, close to the Blackfire Pass, between the southern flatlands of the Empire and the lawless reaches of the Border Princes.

She still had not moved.

'Please help me out,' the young man said. His voice was getting louder, finding strength. 'My name is Franziskus.'

'Franziskus,' she said, 'shut up. You'll bring the greenskins back.'

'I'm over here,' he said, much more quietly. 'Please. Quick. Under all this weight... My lungs - being crushed.'

'Then don't use them so much.'

Angelika had pinpointed the location of the voice and began to step towards it. Finally she saw the movement. It was midway up in the stack of corpses, pointing upwards. She saw wriggling. And shoulders. Of his features, all she could make out was a helmetless head, a mop of what was probably blond, possibly curly, hair soaked flat with congealing blood.

'Please get me out of here. See what part of me you can grab onto and then pull.'

'No.'

There was quiet for a moment, and in it Angelika could hear faraway drums.

'No?' the voice finally said.

'No. Now shut up before I open your throat, on the risk of your attracting orcs.' She'd moved closer to him, so she could speak more quietly. She could see his forehead now, and his eyes, though she did not think he could see her. He kept blinking his eyelids as more blood dripped onto his face from above.

'Please, I promise you, I'll be absolutely silent,' Franziskus said, also barely audible. 'I foxed the orcs into thinking me dead, but I'm not injured. I'll not be a burden to you. All I need is help out, then I'll be on my way. Alone, no burden to you.'

'No.'

'No?'

'Are your ears, too, filled with blood, or are you always hard of hearing?' Angelika's voice remained even, its tone flat and unenlightening.

'But why deny me mercy?'

A moving glint, high and to the left, caught Angelika's eye. It was a pendant, bearing the holy hammer symbol of Sigmar. It was gold. The pendant hung from a clutching hand, out-thrust from the ridge of bodies. Franziskus' squirming had set it to swinging, slightly.

'Why deny me mercy?' Franziskus repeated.

'Your throat remains uncut. Is that not mercy?' She rose up on her toes and plucked the pendant like it was a grape on a vine.

'Why decline me the help I need?'

Angelika began to look for other riches to pick from the corpse pile. Her eyes fixed on a cufflink, perhaps of silver.

'Have you laid eyes on me?' she asked. She reached forward to grab a dead wrist with her off-hand. In the other, her knife sawed at cuff fabric. 'What do you think I am doing here?'

'Did I hear you comforting someone, just now?'

'No.' She tore the cut fabric of the sleeve away and dropped it, with the cufflink, into her purse.

'I am sure I heard this.'

'Hope deceives you. You mistake my nature.'

Franziskus stopped to breathe and Angelika carried on as if she would hear no more of him. She found a boot sticking from the mass of the slain and began to twist and pull at it. It was stuck securely to its master's leg, and resisted her stoutly.

'Then what is your nature?' Franziskus eventually asked.

Angelika pulled some more at the boot. It would not be budged. She wrinkled up her nose at it. It was a flaw of her nature, she admitted to herself, that she was often too stubborn to give up a uselessly difficult task. If she fell into the same old trap, she could easily stand here for half an hour trying to get this one stupid boot off, even though she had no assurance that there was anything good inside it, and even though all around her there were hundreds of other boots on hundreds of other feet.

She realized that Franziskus had said something else to her, but that she had not been paying attention and could not say what it was. She wrinkled her nose again, this time at herself, and then saw a crushed-up hat lying between bodies. It might have a hatpin on it. She yanked at it and, to control the extent of distraction he posed, decided to keep talking to the young man, to answer his previous question.

'You mistake me for some kind of nurse or rescuer. I am here, Franziskus, to loot the bodies of your comrades.' She jangled her purse in his direction. 'Medals, gemstones, coins.' She freed the flattened hat, but found no jewels or pins in its band. Instead, there was a small envelope of brown and waxen paper. She slipped open the flap and looked inside. It contained a darkish powder, one she recognized from the smell. This man had brought with him a little extra surprise for the orcs, and its waxy envelope had even kept it dry. But he had not gotten a chance to use it. Angelika tucked the envelope into the breast pocket of her tunic. The hat she tossed over her shoulder, and it splatted in the muck behind her.

'Why?' he said. His voice's pleading tone was gaining in insistence.

She snorted. 'Why do you think?'

Franziskus began a greater flurry of wriggling, shifting his shoulders back and forth in the evident hope of sliding himself free. At the end of his struggle, he grunted. It seemed to Angelika that he had succeeded only in settling the bodies above him even more heavily upon his chest and limbs. He huffed whimperingly as Angelika removed a succession of boots, to find only a series of soaked and mildewy socks, each covering a set of toes half eaten by trenchfoot.

'You think I am shocked,' Franziskus struggled to say. He stopped to gulp in air. 'And shocked I am, I'll admit. I am new to war, you see. This was my first battle.'

'You should have stayed away.'

'A man of my station is obli-' Franziskus cut off his own thought, as if suddenly aware of the futility of his line of argument. 'Please, there is no reason not to help me. Please help me.'

'Once,' said Angelika, pausing before the pile of corpses to decide where to start next, 'I came upon a battlefield, and set about doing my business, and found a man, a big barrel of a sergeant, lying with a broken arm, pinned under a big piece of cannon. It had exploded at the seams, gone flying through the air, and flattened him into the soft earth.'

'I have heard of such things,' Franziskus said.

She surveyed his reddened face and leaned back against the bodies as if they were a brick wall, to rest up a bit. 'He just needed it rolled off his arm, and he called to me, and I had not been doing this for long.' From her new vantage point, she saw a hand with a fat ring on it, and reached forward to work it down over the knuckle. The blood that slicked the hand made it easier work than it otherwise would have been. 'I was reluctant, because he was a big man, but he pleaded with me as you're doing now. And I went to him, and helped him, and rolled the cannon off his arm. And then, with his good arm, he grabbed a sabre and tried to spit me with it, cursing me as a looter and the desecrator of his comrades.'

'But I won't do that.'

'So you say.'

'I am of noble birth; my word means something.'

'Perhaps you even believe that, in your current straits.' She moved away from the stacked bodies to the scattered pile of dead opposite it, where it would be easier to systematically search each corpse.

'Do you believe in nothing?'

'Yes.'

While he mulled that over, Angelika found a headless artillerist and rolled him over on his back, for better access to buttons and belt buckle.

'You care for nothing but gold?'

'What else is there?'

'I am only a fourth son but still, my family can pay a good reward if you free me.'

'How great a reward?'

'Greater than an assemblage of medals and cufflinks.'

Her tongue darted along inside her cheek. She shook her head, moved on to another corpse. 'I believe only in gold I can place immediately in my hand.'

Franziskus began to breathe quickly in and out, in the manner of a crazed horse or dog. Angelika stood up to survey other areas of the battlefield, to see which might be safely ripe for plucking.

'Then, in general pity's name, I implore you. As one child of Sigmar to another.'

Angelika rounded on her heels, towards him, and for the first time spoke with heat in her voice. 'Your gods and heroes mean nothing to me. They are fairy stories only, tales we tell one another to persuade ourselves that we are more than just meat and bone. All is blood and corruption on this plane, and what lies beyond it is naught. And man – man is nothing more than a finer-looking orc, wrapped up in brocades and finery and books and music but a ravening savage nonetheless. I clean up after what you nobles do, with your never-ending wars of loot and conquest. It's as close as I've found to a worthwhile pursuit in this stinking charnel house of a world. So do not speak to me of pity. It is a word without meaning. It is a lie.'

Franziskus listened as Angelika paused to recover her expended breath. 'Your words are well-schooled, your accent refined. How did–'

She heard mud squishing under boots and glottal growling in the orcish tongue. She pushed her arm through the pile of cadavers and clamped a hand over Franziskus' mouth. She cursed and said, 'They're coming back.'

'I will let go of your mouth now,' she said, scanning what lay ahead of her, to the left and to the right. She did not let go of Franziskus' mouth. She had carefully surveyed the scene before approaching, but now it had all gone out of her head. 'I will let go of your mouth now, but if you so much as cough...'

It was all flat ground, with hills rising up on both sides, up towards the mountains. It was scattered bodies all around, and mud, and – there. A good hundred feet away, an upturned cart, its wheels lopped off its axle, scorch marks up and down its unfinished wood.

She slowly removed her hand from Franziskus's face, ready to clamp it back again if he made a peep. 'They're coming back. Your best hope lies in silence. Be a corpse, Franziskus, or they'll make you one.'

Then she sprinted towards the cart. During the length of her run, she heard nothing but blood rushing in her ears. Saw the battlefield and the strewn corpses floating past her, slowly, as in one of those dreams where you need to run from something, but your legs can scarcely move. Finally she hit the ground beside the cart, rolling in, skidding through mud, slamming into its singed wooden side. As soon as she stopped she could hear other things again. She heard the crows overhead, then another orcish sound, possibly laughing, though Angelika did not know for sure if orcs were capable of laughter. It was not a cheerful or encouraging sound. She wedged both hands in the tiny space between the top of the cart and the muddy ground. It hurt; the cart was heavy and her angle was all wrong. She heard snorting and throaty barking. She girded herself, got the cart up a few inches and then, on her belly, wriggled under the space she'd made. The cart fell back down onto her neck and shoulders, but she scraped along anyhow and worked herself all the way inside. She turned and there was the dead face of a soldier, burned to the quick and grinning yellow teeth at her.

She winced and wriggled away, up towards the front of the cart. A little diffuse red light was working its way under the cart, which meant that maybe there was a space to peep through. Angelika crawled until her eyes and nose sat right in front of this small space between cart and ground. She saw big boots made from scraps of fur and cloth and leather. She saw legs: some naked, green, and muscled; others greaved in mismatched bits of battered metal armor. Counting them, she decided that there were either five or six orcs. Judging their size from the legs, there wasn't a single one of them she'd ever want to fight against.

The legs were stepping their way through bodies on the scattered plain. They hadn't yet reached the big ridge of corpses but they seemed to be poking their way in that direction. Most of the orcish talk seemed to come from one big specimen, possibly the one with the most valuable armour. Angelika wished she could understand them but the orc tongue wasn't just something you could pick up by sitting about in taverns or going to study at a monastery. It was a good enough guess, though, that the well-armoured one's grunts and hisses were orders. He stood there barking, and the others, in response, picked their way through the bodies.

One bent down low enough that its head suddenly entered her field of vision. It was big, shaped like a malformed melon, with a face that was mostly jaw, from which well-chipped ochre tusks, each about the size of Angelika's dagger, jutted unevenly up and down. The orc grabbed at a corpse's wrist with its massive green hand, and stared at it long enough for a white globule of snot to gather in one of its tiny, triangular nostrils, then slide down to its lip, finally disappearing into its mouth. Then the orc, blinking its red-rimmed eyes in frustration or annoyance, let the body's wrist flop listlessly back into the mud.

Angelika could not think what it was they were looking for. Not valuables, certainly. Nor weapons – there were a few pieces lying only partially buried in the mud, and these the orcs ignored.

She turned her head slightly to see what was happening to the side, closer to the body pile. She saw another orc, this one

with pus-filled buboes, each the size of a copper coin, all over the skin of its squashed and narrow head. It ducked down over the body of the old bearded soldier, the one she'd helped die. The orc sniffed the dead man like a dog would, then rubbed its purulent face over the torso. Then it shook its head and vengefully spat a wad of phlegm into the corpse's dead eye.

Angelika understood: they were looking for someone who was still alive. This one could tell somehow that the old veteran was still warm. But not warm enough, which is why he was angry. They'd keep going, she realized, until they found Franziskus. And then the boy would take his revenge on her, pointing out the cart. Angelika told herself that she should have slit his throat when she had the opportunity. But the trouble is, you almost never know whose throat you should cut until afterwards.

A round of low shrieks and gravelly gabbling rose up to the left. Angelika could no longer see any orcs and scrambled to adjust her position, to change her field of view. She hit her knee on a rock and nearly cried out. She pushed her body up flush with the front of the cart, and through the crack could now again see orc feet. Some were dancing up and down. Others were firmly planted. They were in front of the corpse pile. Angelika could not really see what was going on, but from the positions of the legs could guess: they'd found Franziskus and were hauling him out.

She turned again, in the confined space under the cart, looking for a better weapon than her dagger. She imagined them suddenly pulling the cart away and tried to think of the best defense. Probably it would be to leap towards them as soon as the cart moved, to scramble her skinny, mud-slicked body between orcish legs, and keep on going past them. She would run to the right, past the corpse ridge, then up into the hills. Angelika was fast but had never tried to outrun orcs. Her spindly legs might not be a match for the big pillars of muscle underneath those brutes, but that would not stop her from trying. From the sidelines, she'd watched several battles, and knew that often soldiers died because they gave up too soon. Angelika would not die from giving up.

It bothered her that she would not be given the chance to avenge herself against the boy for squealing. Still, he would meet a gruesome end, though at hands other than her own.

She saw Franziskus dangling upside down, then being dropped headfirst into the muck and blood. He rolled over onto his back and reached to his belt for a weapon, but a vast orc boot came crunching down on his wrist. Franziskus bucked and cursed. His face turned red with the effort, but they had him good. His off-hand was still free and Angelika readied herself for what would happen next. The boy would not speak orcish but he could still tell them what they needed to know.

Then the pustule-ridden orc bent down over Franziskus's legs with an oversized cabbage sack. For some reason, its burlap had been dyed a splotchy purple. It had a big drawstring on it, of muck-stained cord. The buboed orc rolled the bag up over the boy's feet and shins while two others held his legs. The bag went up over Franziskus's waist. Then to his chest. The orcs roughly jammed his seized arms down over his torso. Then the bag went up past his shoulders.

Franziskus turned his head towards her. He surely couldn't tell, Angelika knew, that he was meeting her eyes. He directed an imploring expression at her nonetheless. Moving his lips in slow exaggeration, he mouthed the words: *Please. Help. Me.*

Then the bag went up over his head and the drawstring pulled shut and one of the biggest orcs seized it by the top and hefted it over his back, so that all but the cord, dragging in the muck behind him as he walked, disappeared from Angelika's view. The other orc legs and orc boots followed, wasting no time in heading back where they'd come from.

Angelika saw something white and trembling in front of her and at length realized that it was her own hand. She thought that perhaps it would be appropriate to vomit but the physical urge to do so was not in fact upon her. Feeling the cold of the muck she lay in, she wrenched herself up to a sitting position, even though this meant painfully craning her neck.

She could not believe it. The boy hadn't given her away.

Angelika would have to wait a good long time to be sure there would be no more orcs coming.

It had been a certainty to her that the boy would point the finger. She had it all pictured in her head and everything. She was all prepared for what to do next.

She leaned her head against the wood of the cart, letting her breathing slow. She reached up to her face with dirty fingers and felt something wet coming down from her eyes. She assumed it would be blood, from some wound she hadn't noticed getting, but when she looked at her fingers there was no red liquid. So it must have only been tears.

It was sad, she supposed, that the orcs would torture and mutilate and for all she knew even eat the boy. He had turned out to be better than the norm. But there was certainly nothing she could do about it. Or should do. She understood the world better than he.



SHE STOOD ON a granite promontory, up in the hills, looking down at the massed orcs as they moved down south through the pass, back into the border reaches. The walls of mountain rock on both sides gathered up and magnified the grunting and chanting of the orcs below. It felt like they were groaning right into her ear. But she was safe from them; she would look like just a speck, up here, and they were occupied with their unruly march.

The mud was drying already. She looked at a big cake of it on her outer thigh and smacked it off. Idly she wondered which side had initiated the battle in the first place, the patrolling Imperials or the invading orcs. It did not really matter, but Max, to whom she would sell her catch, maintained an interest in military matters and liked to know these things. He said he was writing a book, which he wasn't, but Angelika could get a slightly better price on her wares by humouring him. Even so, she

did not know what she was waiting for. She could glean no further information for Max by watching the orcs now. Even though they held great torches aloft – tree trunks, wrapped in looted cloth and dipped in flammable pitch, each carried by three or four straining, stumbling orcs – details were hard to make out. Maybe an expert on orcs could look down and find signs to interpret, but Angelika had no interest in becoming an expert on orcs.

She turned to go and then stopped. She turned back, to see more clearly what she had just seen, in the corner of her eye. Emerging from a blind spot behind a rock outcropping was a huge cart. Angelika had to pause and compare it with the size of the figures around it to get an accurate sense of its scale. Its wheels – she counted a dozen, then recounted and corrected the figure to ten – were greater in diameter than the height of any nearby orc. Its surface was a flat platform of long planks, somewhere between eighty and one hundred feet long. It boasted neither rails nor sides. Over a hundred sweating, bare-backed orcs, suffering under the lashes of multiple drivers, pitched forward in a series of great, uneven lurches, dragging it behind them. In the middle of the cart there towered an enormous wooden figure. The figure, depicting an orc with gaping mouth and antlered helmet, terminated at the waist, which was flush with the planks of the cart. It looked hollow, like it had been knocked together with nails and scraps of board. The eyes on its squarish face were set on different levels, and several of its large, triangular teeth had already fallen loose and were dangling from the round cave of its stupidly open mouth. Angelika could not tell if the splotches of dark on the figure's surface were paint or dung or mildew.

Her knees felt unsteady, and a voice at the back of her head told her to run, but Angelika kept looking at the thing, confident in the half mile of distance between them. The big figure had only one arm, and this was a separate, levering piece, attached with a big wooden pin to its shoulder. This moveable arm terminated in a great round hammer, its striking surface easily eight, perhaps even ten, feet in diameter. Chains held it up, in ready

position. Angelika, squinting, thought she could make out a pulley contraption set into the platform of the cart, to which the chains were fixed.

Several dozen orcs, all tiny to her eyes, milled around the figure. One in particular seemed larger than the rest, and stood at the cart's forward edge, fists at hips, watching the slave orcs as they strove to yank his conveyance onward. She saw that his foot stood on something, and that the something was moving.

It was a familiar, squirming sack, dyed purple and splotchy, its drawstring now trailing down over the lip of the cart.

So they had not killed the boy yet. It did not take brilliant deduction to realize that the orcs intended to perform some kind of ceremony involving their big crude statue. It would entail placing Franziskus under the hammer's shadow, then loosing the chains, so it would fall upon him, pounding him to paste.

Angelika turned to go. Now she had an interesting fact to share with Max for his imaginary book. It would not be necessary to stay and watch the ceremony. She could imagine the results with sufficient vividness. She crept quietly along the flattish projection of rock she'd been standing on and down to a trail through the brush and bramble. The trail forked two ways, up towards a mountain switchback, or down the face of the hill to the pass. Up around the mountain lay her route to town, and Max, and her money and a hot drink and a softish bed.

She took the trail's downward leg. Angelika had never heard of a thing like the statue. Maybe she could make some more money by making a sketch of it, to sell to scholars or something. Max would know of such scholars, perhaps. They were the sorts of people he was always drinking with. Angelika had heard maybe that there was a market for information. It would be especially true, wouldn't it, when it was information on the Empire's most dangerous enemies? Yes, she was pretty sure of it. So, the reason she was getting closer was to make a sketch. For the money.

Stunted, leathery-leafed trees lined the trail, and Angelika kept low behind them. It was not hard to match the cart's slow

progress. If anything, Angelika, the thumps of her heart radiating up through her chest, wanted it to go faster.

A dried, weedy branch reached out to caress her, leaving a line of burrs hanging from her leggings.

She would not do anything foolish, she told herself.

She pulled the back of her hand across her forehead, wiping sweat away.

Maybe you could say, in some sense, that the boy deserved rescuing, but she would not allow herself to be tempted towards such stupidity.

Drumming started up, somewhere in the distance, and echoed across the walls of rock.

There were hundreds of orcs around, maybe more, and any one of them could kill you with a single blow.

A rock rolled out from under Angelika's foot as she put it down on the path, and she windmilled her arms to try to keep her balance. She crashed into one of the low, bushy trees, grabbing a branch for support. Its bark felt greasy.

Especially that biggest of the orcs, up on the cart, standing over Franziskus. That one could kill you with a single dull fingernail.

Up ahead, she saw that her path dead-ended. The pass widened out, and the trail went right down to its flat bottom. She could stay put, clamber back up the incline through sharp rocks and boulders, or continue on to where the orcs were. She stayed put, cursing her folly.

She heard whip cracks and orcish shouts and looked over to see that the cart drivers were trying to get the haulers stopped. Some at the front had halted, while others behind them trudged peevishly onwards. A pileup began, and the haulers began to push and shove at each other. One particularly large specimen, pushed from behind by a humpbacked, dull-eyed orc, turned and opened his maw wide, exposing his tusks and sending a great spray of spittle back towards his tormentor. A third orc, beside the humpback, squinted as spare sputum hit him, then lurched forward to clamp thick, horny fingers over the larger orc's lower jaw. He pulled downwards, smashing his victim with his

spare fist. Haulers all around these two joined in, limbs flying, jaws gnashing, as the drivers up on the cart directed their whips into the brawling mass. A small chunk of something fleshy and greenish sailed out from the tangle of brawling orcs. Angelika guessed it for a finger or possibly an ear.

Her shoulders seized up in warning as she heard something behind her. Twisting backwards, she saw a trio of orcs making their way quickly down the trail, their eyes on the fight. They intended to join it, but unless she went somewhere, they would run right into her. They blocked her route back into the hills. Her only way was forwards, towards the greater mass of orcs. At least they were distracted.

Angelika leapt. She was in mid-air, sailing over the bushes. She hit the gravelly ground at ravine bottom. The wheels of the cart, now motionless, stood in front of her. She could hear screaming and growling, but no orcs were looking her way. They'd all be up at the front of the cart, where the fight was. She sprinted in between two of the tall, spoked wheels, rocks and pebbles spraying out behind her. Once under the cart, she looked for the best way to hide. The axles were high and wide enough that she could haul herself up on them, and maybe not be seen when the commotion died down up front. She chose an axle in the middle, which would give her more choices when she had to run. Angelika hefted herself up and laid herself out on her back, across the axle. It was not comfortable, but she could balance herself and was not in immediate danger of falling off. What would happen when the cart started moving again, she could not predict.

The sounds from up ahead were trailing off to yelping and isolated snarls, so Angelika could only guess that the orc leaders had violently snuffed out the brawl. She would be stuck here for a while, until the next distraction. This would probably occur after the cart started up again, and then reached its final destination. She could creep away then. This would teach her forever, she thought. She promised herself that the next time she saw someone being carried off to an awful fate, she would act true to her beliefs, and

leave him to his destiny. She made a point of feeling the hardness of the axle as it dug into her spine; she would recall this sensation when next she got an imbecilic temptation to do otherwise.

She thought about possible escape routes. Both the brushy inclines on either side of the pass would be good ways to get out, so long as they remained free of orcs.

The cart stayed stopped. Perhaps this was its final destination.

She heard something to the left, and strained to see it, through wheel-spokes. Four orcish pallbearers carried a wooden pallet past the cart's far side. Angelika could not fully see the honored corpse they bore, but he was at least as big an orc as the one she'd seen atop the cart, lording it over Franziskus's sack.

The pallbearers halted when they reached the front of the cart, and Angelika saw the pallet being hauled up onto it. It looked for a moment as if the corpse would fall off, but then she saw it was bound to the pallet with knotted lengths of cloth.

Angelika sifted her memory for what little she knew of orcs and their ways. The big dead orc must be the previous leader, killed in the battle. The big live orc must be taking over. The ceremony in which Franziskus was about to be sacrificed was to celebrate the live one's ascendance, or to mourn the dead one's loss, or both.

There was a thumping up top, and the planks of the cart rattled and vibrated just inches from the top of Angelika's head. She could tell that all of the hopping up and down was taking place near the cart's forward edge. She heard the exultant howling of an army of gore-mad orcs. Horns blew and the throng silenced itself somewhat. A deep, bellowing voice boomed out over them.

This would be it. That would be the big orc giving its speech. Things were reaching a head. It was time to go. She dropped down from the axle and back under the cart, pointing herself towards the trail she'd come from. Then, up by the front-most wheel, she saw it: the dangling drawstring. It bobbed up and down, so she knew the boy was still inside the bag. He would be right within reach. She edged

forward, towards it. She reached, stretching her fingers out, nearly brushing the drawstring with their tips. Then she pulled them back. What was she thinking? You couldn't stop at a time like this. Pulling on the drawstring would accomplish nothing anyway. She'd have to reveal herself to the orcs to get up on top, then get him out of the bag, then... There was no chance. She bolted from under the cart back towards the trail, her head swiveling to see if any orcs spotted her.

She made it to the start of the incline, then scrambled upwards, grabbing dirt and rocks as handholds, then got up to the line of bushy trees, and dove for the ground behind them. She flattened herself to the earth and thanked the nonexistent gods for her good fortune. She poked her head up watchfully.

She saw the cart. The new leader had freed the old, dead one from his pallet and held him by the scruff of the neck. Below him, orcs capered and banged drums and shook fists and screeched on dissonant bugles. Grabbing the massive corpse by clapping both hands around its head, the new boss drew it close to him and kissed its cruel, upcurving lips. Then he turned and hurled the body into the waiting mob, which seized it and bore it aloft, passing it backwards. The orc army threw their old leader's body up into the air, then caught it, then threw it up, each time letting loose with an animal cheer. Sometimes the body would sink below the level of the crowd, to resurface moments later with a tusk or digit missing: they were taking souvenirs of their slain hero. Gradually the body turned from venerated item to punching sack, resurfacing bloodier each time before finally disappearing forever near the back of the throng. The new boss orc threw his heavy arms up into the air and screamed something that could not have been articulate even in orcish. Angelika could not help shuddering.

She looked at the bag, in which Franziskus squirmed. The big orc was shouting some more, but an orcish oration could not last long. The next step would be the boy's demise.

Angelika leapt from the bushes and ran down towards the cart again, letting the slope of the incline propel her downwards and forwards. A couple of stray orcs stepped from behind the front wheels of the cart, to intercept her. They were squat and shovel-faced, runts by the standards of the others she'd seen today. Maintaining her momentum, blade in hand, she flew towards them. She felt her knife find purchase in flesh, ducked low to evade a swiping hand, and felt wet warm blood spackle her face and arms. The closest orc lurched over, clutching its windpipe. The other, behind her, was in the midst of a backswing with a huge, well-notched battleaxe. She jumped into the air, landing on the back of the hunched-over orc, and used him as the springboard for a second leap, which took her up onto the edge of the cart. As her arms and chest impacted painfully with the cart's planks, she saw the second orc's axe come down on the other's spine, where her legs had been a moment before. The axe head sunk deep into the first orc and out through the belly side; its owner struggled to free it.

Angelika pulled her dangling legs up onto the cart. She saw Franziskus, freed of the bag, the boss orc towering over him, dragging him by the hair. The orc was pulling him towards a set of shackles under the hammer's shadow. Angelika saw the boss's head turn towards her, its red eyes fury-filled. It howled. It reached down and punched Franziskus savagely in the stomach. Franziskus curled up, gasping, hugging knees to chin. A sling stone whistled in from the crowd below; it went far wide of Angelika and plunked against the wooden statue. The boss orc looked at it and growled something at his men. He'd be telling them not to fire any missiles his way, and also that he could take care of one scrawny human woman himself. Then he advanced on her. There were other orcs on the platform, four of them near the back, all in good armour. They stepped up, but the boss waved them back, too.

He did not deign to pull a weapon, merely drawing his massive hands into claws and loudly cracking their joints. He stepped ponderously forward. He cocked his head to one side and seemed to grin,

shaking big wattles of loose skin that trailed from his bony jaw.

Angelika felt the leaden weight of her feet, planted on the planks of the cart. She felt the puniness of the tiny knife in her hand. She gulped and sprinted forwards. The orc swung prematurely, and she slipped under his blow to jab her knife up at his throat. But she could not reach, and the knife hit his blackened breastplate, bending like a blade of grass. She rolled, trying to make it through his trunk-like legs, but he closed them on her, and squeezed. She felt wrenching pain as he grabbed one of her legs and twisted it. She wriggled herself forwards and somehow out of his grip. She turned and rolled and hit the planks. Air bolted from her lungs as her opponent kicked her in the side with metal-toed boots. She rolled again and up to her feet and staggered forwards. In blurred peripheral vision, she saw that Franziskus had crawled his way back, most of the way past the wooden figure. The orc lieutenants stood watch over him; one seemed ready to smash him with a hammer if he got too far away.

Vibrations of the boards she stood on warned her to turn back to see her foe. He was charging. She stood her ground. At the last moment, she ducked and kept on going, grabbing onto a hilt poking out from a scabbard at his belt. She stumbled gracelessly past him, a huge hacking sabre now in her hands. A throat-scraping cheer went up behind her. The orcs were happy for the added attraction. She was an addition to the ceremony. They wanted her to put up a colourful fight before their leader finally dispatched her.

She struggled to heft the immense weapon. She grabbed it with both hands, held it overhead, and charged the orc boss, who now stood with feet spread complacently apart, awaiting her charge. Angelika rushed towards him, then her head was ringing and she was flying backwards through the air. She landed on her behind. What echoed around her was definitely the laughter of orcs. The boss had reversed her charge merely by clipping her on the forehead with the heel of his hand, which he still held out to her in mocking display. She struggled to her feet, picked up the heavy sword again, and once

more charged. This wrung another crash of laughter from the open-throated throng.

As she ran, she looked to Franziskus, still lying sprawled, and saw that she had caught his eye. She thought she saw him nod. She ran at the orc, whose grinning mouth widened. She held the sword aloft, as she had before. But at the point of impact, she swayed low, instead sticking the weapon between the orc's legs, and pushing him. Tripping on the sword, he fell backwards, landing flat and spread-eagled, near the shackles.

Franziskus kicked forward, loosing the chain. It went slack. It rang and jangled through the pulley. The hammer dropped. The figure rocked. The orc boss's eyes widened. He slid himself forward. The hammer landed. It caught only the boss's skull, squashing it flat and sending a jet of gray matter squirting down the length of the cart, to stop short of the feet of his lieutenants.

Angelika staggered back upright and felt terror's power fill her bones. She saw one of the lieutenants reach down to seize Franziskus, but then a second stopped his hand, following up with a sudden butt to the forehead.

Of course. Now they will fight to see who becomes boss, ignoring distractions. She stumbled towards the lad and grabbed him by the collar of his tunic. A tumult arose behind her and she spun to see a mass of orcs clambering up on the cart to get them. She fumbled in her breast pocket, for the envelope she'd found back on the battlefield. The flash powder. She scooped into the envelope with her fingers, and threw the contents at the swarming orcs. She closed her eyes in advance of the flash, then opened them to see gobbets of thick smoke filling the air, and blinded orcs stumbling into one another.

Yanking Franziskus's collar, she half-dove from the cart. They landed badly, in a tangle together, but extricated themselves and dashed for the bushes, ignoring their pain. Angelika, in the lead, seized the lad when they reached the low trees. She pulled him down and they watched the writhing frenzy as partisans of the various battling lieutenants cheered on their candidates, or brawled viciously amongst

themselves. They waited for vengeful outriders to come beating the bushes for them, but none bothered. As one tottering lieutenant seemed to win out, rivals' pulped bodies quivering at his feet, they slipped away.



THEY DID NOT start talking until they were well clear of the orcs, on a down-sloping road around on the mountain's other side. The adrenalin had left them, and now their bones ached and bruises throbbed.

'I knew I could count on you,' Franziskus said to her.

'Nonsense.'

'Despite what you said, basic human goodness won out.'

She snorted derisively.

'Your basic, human goodness.'

'You mean idiotic, suicidal foolishness.'

'You say this, but it is merely to assuage your pride.'

'Shut up.'

'I will prove my gratitude to you. You saved my life and I owe you everything.'

'You'll do whatever I ask?'

Franziskus fervently nodded.

'Then sod off,' she said.

He stopped, looking surprised.

'I mean it. Go away. And if you tell anyone of the weakness I showed today, I'll creep after you and gut you while you snore. Do you understand?' She stopped, too, looking up at the sky. Dark clouds were coming in, hiding the stars. She looked at Franziskus, who turned his gaze from her and kept going.

'I have sworn to repay you, and repay you I shall,' he said, eyes closed, nose upturned.

'Cretin,' she said.

'Basic human goodness,' he said.

'Everything I said to you was the truth, and everything I did was a lie,' she said.

The two continued down the stony roadway, disappearing from view. 🐾

IN THE GRIM DARKNESS OF THE FAR FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR

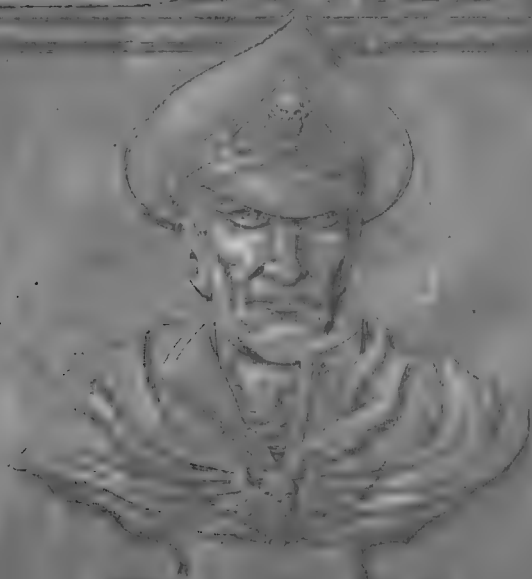


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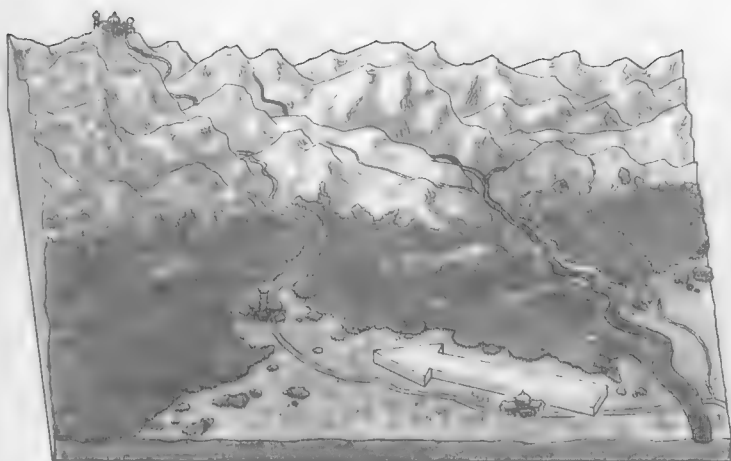
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THE BATTLE OF BHAVNAGER



The Sabbat Worlds
Crusade
Vol XXIV; Haida
Chap. XIII Bhavnager



The Honour Guard sped North from Hagia's capital, Doctrinopolis, towards shrinehold. In its path lay the Infardi defended town of Bhavnager.

Bhavnager

was a battle fought against the clock. A clock that was ticking away the minutes towards the destruction of the Shrineworld Hagia. A battle where the tanks of the Emperor's forces would duel with the armour of the arch-enemy, the fate of an entire world the prize for the eventual victor.

The Tanith

First and Only had fought a long, hard campaign in the Sabbat system and now found themselves on a new world facing a new enemy. Their stealth fighting capabilities made them a valuable commodity in any theatre of war but in the face of enemy armour they would find themselves reassessing their tactics.



Salamander Scouts would lead the column into enemy territory.

Reserve supplies, ammo, camouflage netting. All are loaded onto the Conqueror.

Shell Selection is a crucial part of the tank commander's duties.

Preparations for the mission were carried out in great haste yet with meticulous care. There would be no reinforcements so all supplies had to be carried with them. This Conqueror is being readied.

An Honour Guard

under the command of Col. Gaunt had been assigned a desperate mission to recover Holy relics from deep within enemy held territory. His Tanith infantry regiment was accompanied by a Pardus tank company. Its first major objective before entering the Hagian sacred hills was Bhavnager.

The Only Fuel

before the mountains lay in this major conurbation. It was essential to capture these reserves for any chance of the mission's success.

The Infardi

were the local incarnation of the Chaos forces that dominated the

Sabbat Worlds. No mere fanatical rabble they were equipped by the manufactories on Urdesh.

Serious Contact

with enemy armour forced the recon spear to rapidly withdraw. It was clear that the Infardi were going to defend the town in some force.

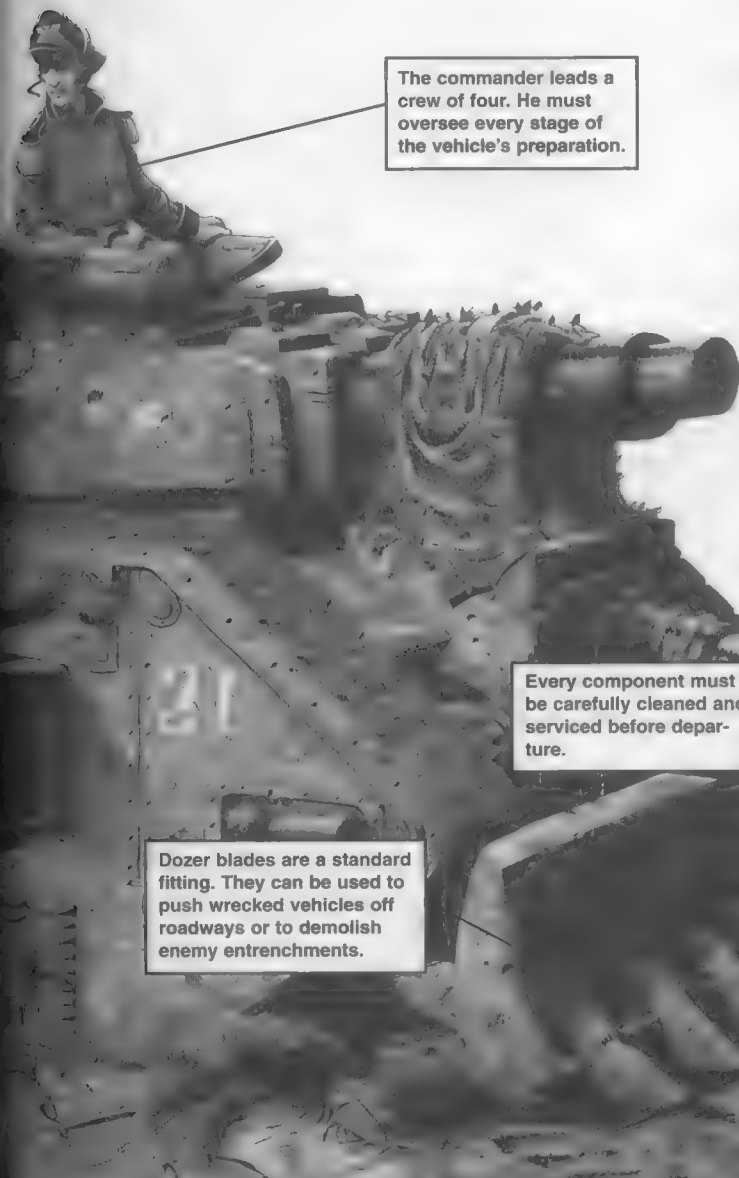
Nightfall Was Near

but any delay was unacceptable. Gaunt deemed that even without a proper assessment of the enemies position an attack would have to be launched. It was doubted that much armour could oppose them, and this would be smashed by the superior Imperial forces.

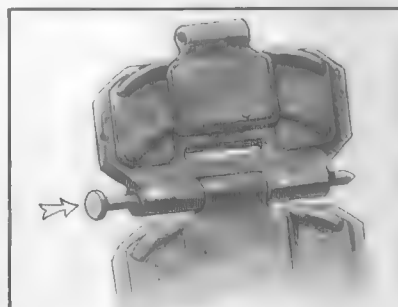


Traditionally every tank in the Pardus company is named by its commander and has an individual icon painted onto its hull.

The icon above is taken from the *Wrath of Pardua* which is commanded by Captain Sirus.



The commander leads a crew of four. He must oversee every stage of the vehicle's preparation.



A tank's tracks are one of its most important components. On Leman Russ Conquerors the plates are joined by a pin whose head rests next to the hull. It is pushed back into place by a sloped plate if it works loose.

Every component must be carefully cleaned and serviced before departure.

Dozer blades are a standard fitting. They can be used to push wrecked vehicles off roadways or to demolish enemy entrenchments.

A Plan Was Devised

whereby the main Honour Guard forces would pile down the main road to Bhavnager and engage the enemy. The Infardi would be forced to face this overwhelming threat, whilst their flank would be hit by a squad of Conquerors under Major Rawne. It was a daring plan but one that needed to be carried out if the mission on Hagia was to be a success

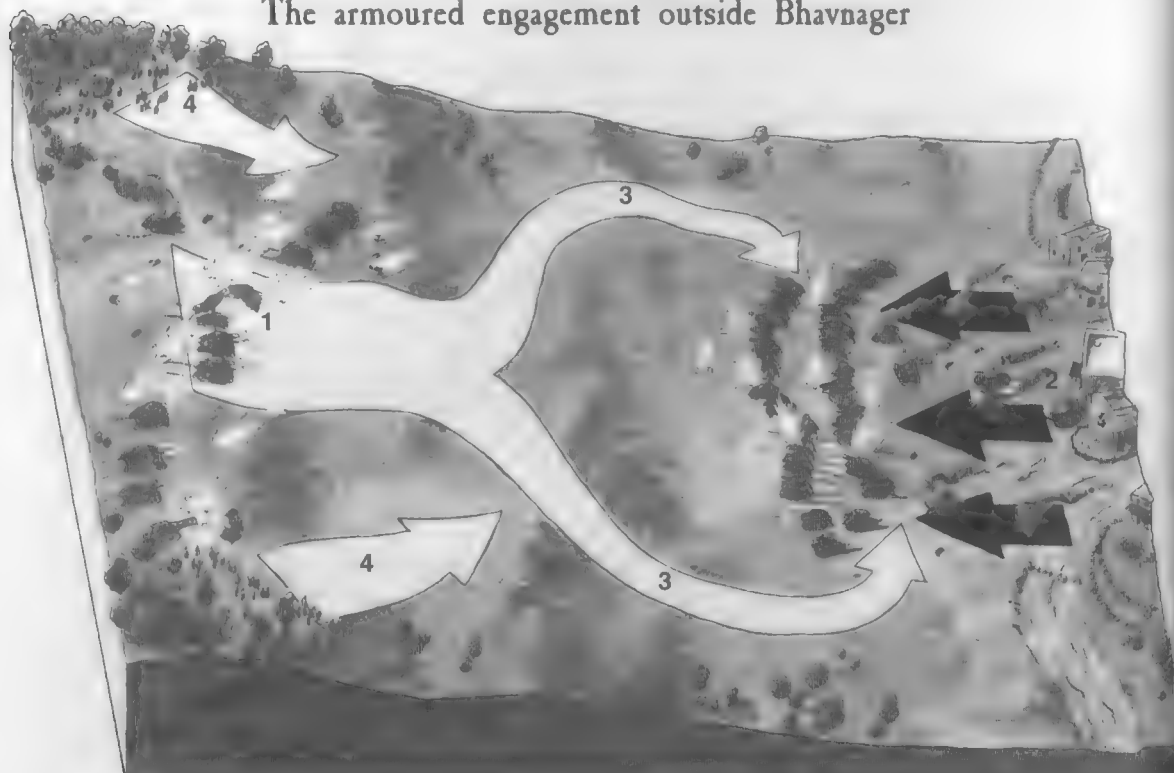
The Odds Changed

dramatically when forty odd enemy vehicles charged out to meet the assault. Outgunned four to one the Imperial forces ploughed down the gentle incline, guns rapidly targeting then firing in devastating succession. The audacity of the Imperial assault caught the Infardi forces on the hop but even so heavy losses were inevitable.

It Was A Long Shot

situation but one that Major Kleopas's training had prepared him for. Retreat never crossed his mind, only advance. The Emperor's warriors advantage lay in rapid movement and taking out the enemy's armour on the run. The Conquerors and their crews had several key advantages - speed, superior training, improved armaments - and they knew how to use them.

The armoured engagement outside Bhavnager



Lieutenant Kleopas led his column of Conquerors (1) at full speed towards the enemy armour (2), before splitting his force to encircle the enemy (3). Once fully engaged Colonel Gaunt charged forth with his Tanith infantry regiment in close support (4).

Inferior Technology

in the enemy AT-70's meant that they lacked the Conqueror's speed and more crucially their gyroscopically stabilised and auspex aided aim locking weapons systems. This meant their accuracy didn't suffer regardless of movement or Hagia's irregular terrain. The technological advantage alone was not enough to ensure victory however and the Imperial forces would have to

rely upon much more to win the day.

Superior Tactics

were employed by Kleopas. He kept his forces moving at full speed, and split his troop to hit the weaker enemy flanks. The opposition were drawn in to the cleverly laid trap and swung the advantage over to the forces of the Imperium. The Infardi armour tried to

match the Imperial movements, and thus compromised the weight of numbers.

Firing On The Move

diminished the Infardi's accuracy dramatically, whilst their charge led them into the jaws of the pincer. The Tanith infantry followed up the armour's action in a classic combined arms operation. The odds were overcome. The town lay open to an assault.

AT-70 Data profile

The AT-70 was the Infardi main battle tank. Easily mass produced but lacking in speed or advanced technology.

Origin: Urdesh

Weight: 64 Tonnes

Height: 4.95m

Hull Length: 6.87m

Hull Width: 4.62m

Armour: 40-150mm

Maximum Speed: 23/16 kph

Crew: 4

Armament: 105mm long-barrelled Urdeshi cannon. Coaxial mounted mortar



Inf 15 0147/0150/NT1

NT-20 Data profile

The distinctive 'boxy' profile and vulnerability of these troop carriers quickly earned them the derisive nickname of 'coffins'.

Origin: Urdesh

Weight: 29 Tonnes

Height: 4.31m

Hull Length: 7.03m

Hull Width: 4.62m

Armour: 30-100mm

Maximum Speed: 46/32 kph

Crew: 3

Armament: 40mm Urdeshi short-barrelled cannon. Cupola mounted bolter (optional)



Inf 15 0173/00507/M11

Steg-4 Data profile

A light tank with good manoeuvrability and low profile but with too weak a punch in its main armament.

Origin: Urdesh

Weight: 27 Tonnes

Height: 3.86m

Hull Length: 4.87m

Hull Width: 4.35m

Armour: 40-120mm

Maximum Speed: 68/42 kph

Crew: 3

Armament: 40mm Urdeshi long-barrelled cannon.



Inf 15 0101/0120/M11

Rawne Had Stalled

on the flank. At this stage he was expected to have been within the town. Such a strategic position would have put him in the rear of the enemies defensive lines, thus trapping them within an assault from all sides. Without the support of Rawne's troops the main advance could have soon become short and bloody.

The Sudden Immolation

of a Conqueror had signalled the existence of a minefield. Any further advance, and any hope of reinforcing the main

attack on Bhavnager, was impossible until a route was cleared.

The Gloom Gathered

as Gaunt realised a frontal assault through the town was the only option. No delay was permissible lest the element of surprise be forfeited. This was a job for the veteran Tanith troopers. Their valuable fighting experience had polished their skills to an impressive level.

Fiery Death

awaited the unbelievers as flame-troopers advanced,


sweeping the warehouses on the edge of town and clearing out the lightly armoured Infardi troops.

Smoke Billowed

from burning buildings, yet resistance was stiff. Only the close combat skills, and honed tactical communication between the Tanith gave them the impetus to advance.

Tortuously Slowly

each building, then street gave way to the advance. Even concealed and dug in enemy armour was overcome as the Pardus tank company operated



Flame-troopers proved indispensable in the clearing of buildings.

The veteran Tanith carry a personal and deadly array of close combat weapons.

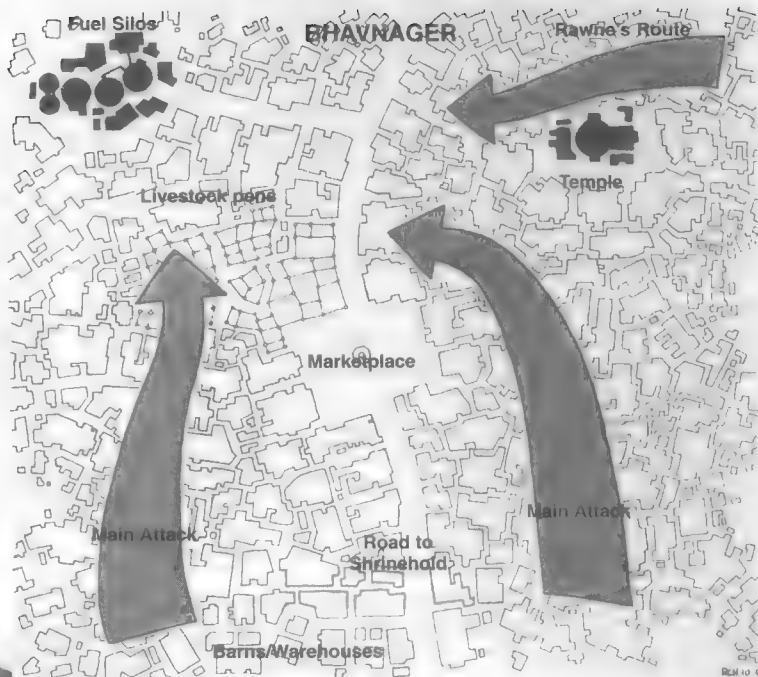
The fanaticism of the Infardi led to ferocious close quarters fighting. Several suicidal human wave attacks nearly swamped the Tanith troopers.

in a close infantry support role. The marketplace was overrun as the prime objective came gradually closer

Victory Was To Be

won as the fighting moved under the imposing dominance of the huge fuel silos. Only for spirits to sink deeper than ever at a truly awesome sight, a sight that might have spelled the end of the valiant assault on Bhavnager.

The Infardi leaders had much better quality equipment, including personal force field generators.



The routes of attack into Bhavnager

Despite being heavily equipped from Urdesh, the Infardi still ended up with a motley selection of uniforms and differing equipment.

Dread Overwhelmed

the Imperial forces as a captured Imperial Baneblade nosed its bulk into sight. Truly cursed are those faithful servants of Emperor that are forced to oppose our own heaviest armour.

A Hideous Death Toll

was exacted upon infantry and armour alike. The Imperial forces at Bhavnager had no weaponry that could hope to penetrate the super-heavy behemoth's armour plating and the gigantic tank could pick off targets at will. With the Imperial forces decimated the attack faltered then broke in panic, as the Infardi counter attacked.

The Flank Attack

had finally opened a narrow path through the minefield, and now Rawne's tanks arrived in time to see all hopes for the mission evaporating.

Only One Man

could make an impact. Tank commander Sirius always carried augur shells. He believed himself to be philosophically tactical. He always wanted an option. Acting quickly he managed to blast a hole in the monumental armour of the baneblade.

Retaliation

was swift as Sirius's tank disintegrated into multitudinous pieces

of shrapnel. Yet he had done enough as every other tank targeted the augur inflicted holes. The Emperor's holy fire rained down on the captured Baneblade as the tide of battle turned once more in the Imperial force's favour. The titanic eruption signalled victory as the combined might of the Tanith and Parduan forces rolled into Bhavnager and secured the objective.

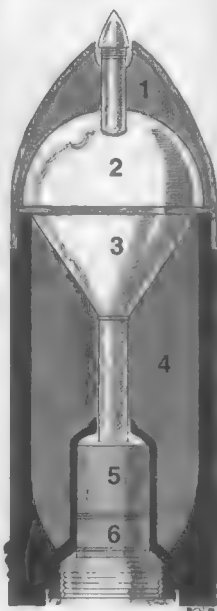
The Crucial Victory

won here indicates clearly how the Emperor's blessed forces can overcome even the steepest odds through a firm grounding in tactics and the sound assumption that the unexpected will happen.

Vivit Post Funera Virtus

Virtue lives beyond the grave

AUGUR SHELL



1. Nose Cap
2. Diaphragm
3. Ceramite Liner
4. AP charge
5. Exploder charge
6. Tracer

The destruction of the captured Baneblade signalled victory for the Imperial forces at Bhavnager.



WHITE DWARF

White Dwarf is Games Workshop's monthly magazine. Each issue showcases all the latest games and miniatures and is packed with exciting articles including tactical advice on how to get the most from your army on the field of battle, tips for painting your miniatures and tense battle reports highlighting the trials and tribulations of commanding an army.

DARKNESS DESCENDS!

The Fellowship of the Ring movie has finally arrived, so the January issue of White Dwarf really goes to town on our new Lord of the Rings game, with interviews, painting and modelling. Plus the Balin's tomb scene from the film is played out as a gripping battle report. And, of course, there's everything you'd expect for Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000.

- The new High Elf army arrives with designer's notes, background, painting and modelling.
- History and a new army list for the plague-ridden Death Guard Chaos Space Marines.
- 'Eavy Metal Masterclass brings expert advice on painting the stunning new Tyrion figure.
- Extra rules for using sub-plots in your Cityfight battles.
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- The Tau clash with Salamanders Space Marines in a Cityfight battle report.



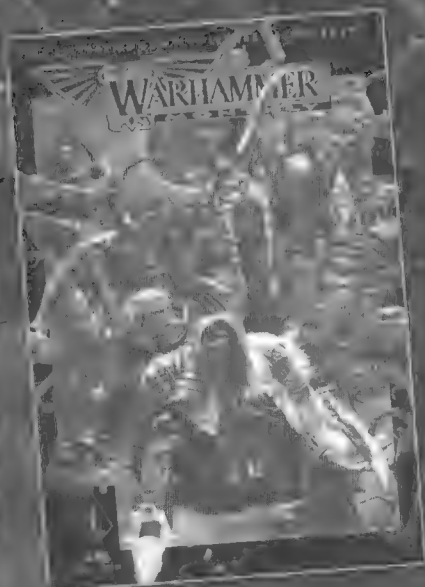
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LESS FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT

The Executioner's Tale

SCRIPT: JONATHAN GREEN · ART: GRAHAM MCDONALD
LETTERS: FIONA STEPHENSON

THE TEN-TAILED CAT
IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN
THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS
A GATHERING PLACE FOR
RACONTEURS AND THE
TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED
CAT FOR MANY REASONS.
SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR
EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE
AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO
UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR
PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...



TEN-TAILED CAT

WHILE SOME JUST
COME TO DRINK...
DRINK TO *FORGET*.

BOUND TO BE.
I'VE ONLY EVER SEEN MEN LOOK
AS LOW AS YOU FOR ONE OF *TWO*
REASONS - *MONEY* OR *WOMEN*. AND
IF YOU'LL FORGIVE ME FOR SAYING SO,
YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE A MAN WHO'S
EVER HAD MUCH OF THE
FORMER.

I'M RIGHT
AREN'T I? IT'S A
WOMAN?

A
WOMAN IS
IT?

HUH?



YOU
MIGHT SAY
THAT.

I
KNEW
IT!

SO YOU'RE
DRINKING TO
FORGET?



I WISH
IT WAS THAT
SIMPLE.

WHAT
DO YOU
MEAN?

IT'S A
SORRY STORY AND
IF YOU HEARD IT YOU
WOULDN'T *BELIEVE*
IT.



NOW THERE'S
A *CHALLENGE*, IF EVER
I HEARD ONE! TELL US YOUR
STORY, *FRIEND*, AND WE'LL
SEE WHETHER IT IS TO
FORGET OR
NOT.

VERY WELL -
I'LL TELL YOU MY TALE,
ALTHOUGH THE TELLING OF
IT WON'T MAKE THINGS
ANY *BETTER* FOR ME
AND WILL NO DOUBT MAKE
THINGS *WORSE* FOR
YOU!

'I DOUBT YOU'VE HEARD OF **WEIRSTADT** IN **MOCHLAND** BUT UNTIL FOUR YEARS AGO IT WAS UNDER THE RULE OF **LORD FRANZ VERDAMMEN**.'

'A MORE **TYRANNICAL** RULER YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN HARD-PRESSED TO FIND THIS SIDE OF THE **WORLD'S EDGE MOUNTAINS**...'

FOR STEALING THE **GOLDEN RELIQUARY OF SAINT SEVERUS** FROM THE SHRINE OF **SIGMAR** I FIND YOU GUILTY OF THE CRIME OF **SACRILEGE**. THE SENTENCE IS **DEATH!**

YOU SHALL BE TAKEN TO THE BLOCK AT

TAKE HIM AWAY!

B-BUT IT'S LIES, ALL LIES! I'VE COMMITTED NO CRIME! I AM INNOCENT!

'...AND I WAS HIS APPOINTED EXECUTIONER

'AT MY LORD'S BEHEST, ALL MANNER OF **POACHERS, CRIMINALS, DISSIDENTS AND RIVALS** WERE SENT INTO **MORR'S REALM** BEFORE THEIR TIME BY MY AXE.

SIGMAR HAVE MERCY ON ME.

'AND I WOULD BE LYING IF I SAID I DIDN'T **ENJOY** MY WORK FOR I WAS A **CRUEL AND VIOLENT VILLAIN** WHO REVELLED IN **TORTURE AND MURDER**.

'BUT ALL THAT CHANGED WHEN **VERDAMMEN** TOOK HIMSELF A **WIFE**.

'**BARELY SIXTEEN**, THE GIRL WAS A **TOTAL INNOCENT** AND CERTAINLY DIDN'T DESERVE TO BE MARRIED TO AN **OSRE** LIKE **VERDAMMEN**. HE **ROBBED** HER OF HER INNOCENCE AND ONCE HE TIRED OF HIS NEW BRIDE HE WANTED RID OF HER **ALTOGETHER**.

SO IT WAS THAT MY LADY FOUND HERSELF FACING THE JUDGEMENT OF HER HUSBAND, ACCUSED OF HAVING AN ADULTEROUS AFFAIR WITH ONE OF THE COURT MUSICIANS.

FOR CARRYING ON THIS AFFAIR UNDER MY ROOF, AND IN DOING SO MOCKING MY NOBLE AUTHORITY, I FIND YOU GUILTY OF TREASON, WIFE!

BUT MY LORD, I HAVE DONE NOTHING WRONG. I WOULD NEVER MAKE A MOCKERY OF OUR WEDDING VOWS.

IT WAS NOT HARD TO SEE THE ACCUSATION FOR THE *SHAM* IT WAS - MY LORD AS MUCH AS ADMITTED TO ME THAT HE HAD MADE IT ALL UP.

ENOUGH! TAKE THIS TRAITOROUS HARLOT AND HER POUTING PEACOCK OF A LOVER FROM MY SIGHT! THEY BOTH DIE AT DAWN!

MY LORD! I BEG OF YOU, HAVE MERCY!

FOR BESIDES, IT WAS WELL-KNOWN ABOUT THE COURT THAT THE POWDER-FACED MINSTREL WAS - HOW CAN I PUT THIS? GUNNING FOR THE OTHER ARTILLERY SCHOOL.

SO AT DAWN THE NEXT DAY, MY LADY AND HER 'LOVER' CAME TO THE BLOCK, WHILE THE *LIV-VERRED BUFFOON* PLEADED FOR HIS LIFE BETWEEN BLUBBERING SOBS, MY MISTRESS HELD HER COMPOSURE AS BEST SHE COULD

THE MUSICIAN WAS THE FIRST TO FEEL MY AXE BITE.

BUT AS MY LADY WAS FORCED TO HER KNEES BEFORE THE BLOCK, SHE LOOKED UP AT ME WITH TEARS IN HER EYES AND MADE A STARTLING

I PAUSED - FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY EMPLOY AS AN EXECUTIONER - UNSURE OF WHAT TO DO.

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR, MAN? FINISH THE JOB! KILL HER!

PLEASE, DON'T DO THIS SPARE US!

GOOD SIR, I BEG OF YOU, DO NOT DO THIS, FOR I AM INNOCENT AND HAVE DONE NOTHING WRONGS.

BUT IF YOU WILL NOT PUT ASIDE YOUR AXE FOR ME DO SO FOR MY LORD'S UNBORN CHILD THAT I CARRY NOW INSIDE ME!

P-PLEASE DON'T KILL ME - SOB! - I DON'T WANT T-TO DIE! SOB!

'AT MY LORD'S COMMAND I HAD
KILLED HIS YOUNG BRIDE, BUT HER
FINAL PLEAS *HAUNTED* ME AND
THAT NIGHT I WAS WITNESS TO A
TERRIBLE *VISITATION*.

WHO IS IT?
WHO'S THERE?
WHAT DO YOU
WANT?

BY
SIGMAR!

'BY MORNING I HAD
CONVINCED MYSELF
THAT THE APPEARANCE
OF THE APPARITION HAD
BEEN NOTHING MORE
THAN A *NIGHTMARE*.

'BUT THE VERY NEXT
NIGHT THE GHOST OF MY
LADY APPEARED TO ME
AGAIN - ONLY THIS TIME
SHE WAS NOT ALONE.

I KNOW
YOU, YOU WERE SENTENCED
TO DEATH FOR STEALING
FROM THE SHRINE OF SIGMAR.
YOU HAD BEEN POACHING
DEER.

YOU COULD
HAVE SPARED US.
OUR LIVES WERE
IN YOUR HANDS.

ONLY TO FEED
MY FAMILY AFTER
VERDAMMEN MADE US
HOMELESS FOR NOT
PAYING HIS PEOPLES
TAX.

'EACH NIGHT THE GHOSTS RETURNED AND EACH NIGHT THERE WERE *MORE*
OF THEM, BUT THEY ALL HAD ONE THING IN COMMON - THEY WERE ALL THE
RESTLESS SPIRITS OF THOSE I HAD *EXECUTED* ON VERDAMMEN'S ORDERS.

'WRACKED WITH *GUILT*, THAT GNAWED AWAY
INSIDE ME, UNABLE TO SLEEP AND HAUNTED BY
THE *SPECTRES* OF THOSE I HAD KILLED, I FOUND
MYSELF DRIVEN TO THE BRINK OF *MADNESS*.

'BUT IN DEATH MY LADY
SHOWED ME MERCY, ALTHOUGH
IN LIFE I HAD SHOWN HER NONE

'SO IT WAS THAT WHILE MY LORD SLEPT
I CREEPT INTO HIS BEDCHAMBER

THERE IS A
WAY YOU CAN
RID YOURSELF
OF THE GUILT
AND PAIN.

THEN
TELL ME WHAT IT
IS, I'LL DO ANYTHINS!
JUST TELL
ME!

THUNK!

RAIDED THE CASTLE THAT NIGHT AND HAVE
SAVED THE LIFE OF A VAGABOND EVER
SINCE, I HAVE NEVER USED MY AXE SINCE

INCREDIBLE.

BUT
THE GHOSTS WERE
WRONGS, THE GUILT,
THE PAIN...

IT
NEVER GOES
AWAY.

THE END

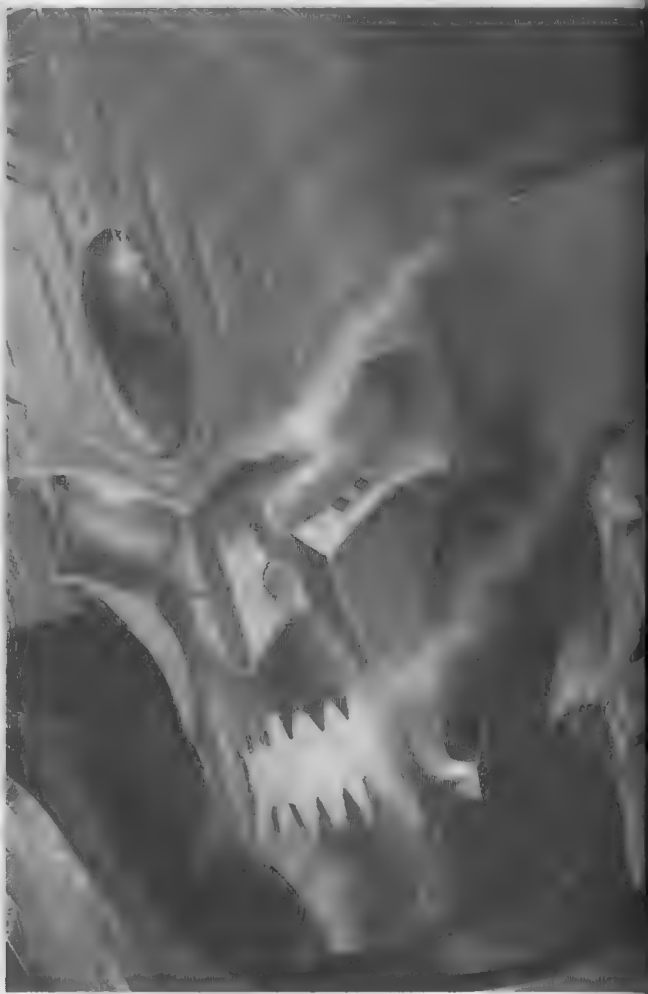


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BARATHRUM

by JONATHAN CURRAN

NIGHT, AND THE site is quiet as a morgue. The only sound is the gentle clink clink of chains rustling from the high ceiling, connected to the crane mechanisms running from gantries the length of the hangar. Machines hum silently, a faint disturbance of the air the only sign that they are active. The occasional light pierces the twilight walkways and balconies, stairways and alcoves. Archaeo-site R347 is the inside of a great hive, its workers and machines the silent insects, termites in the service of the machine-god.

Tech-Brother Crans stands bent over a workbench, a tray of thick viscous fluid in front of him. Immersed in the unguents is an array of fine machinery, tiny metal plates and wires meshed together in intricate fractal patterns. Crans murmurs prayers, manipulator gloves caressing the fine wires, divining rods following the paths of energy locked in the device.

He straightens up, stretching his sore back. Removing the manipulators, he lays them down on the workbench and raises the optical enhancers from in front of his eyes. Balancing them on his forehead, he rubs his tired eyes with his fingers. He's worked with mechanical optics all his life, yet has steadfastly refused bio-implants of his own, maintaining that the optics he was born with would see him to the grave.

Something. A noise, almost inaudible.

Crans turns round.

'Hello,' he calls, quietly, almost so as not to disturb the tranquillity of the place. He appreciates the silence and solitude, it's why he chooses to work at night. He doesn't want to disturb it. 'Is anybody there?'

Nothing.

He turns back to the workbench, flipping the opticals back down in front of his eyes. The component swings back into view, large as a fist. He picks up the manipulators.

A crash, as something falls behind him.

He spins round, and something fills his vision, the opticals fighting to make sense of the image, magnified hundreds of times.

Then his sight fills with red mist as something hard and sharp shatters the opticals, plunges into the flesh around his eyes, driving through bone and filling his head with fiery pain.

The last thing he hears before the darkness of death overwhelms him is the soft shuffle of slippered feet walking quickly towards him.



ECHO TWELVE *bearing three three zero, range forty clicks and counting. Requesting landing permission, code blue seven oh seven. Over.*

A burst of static. Then.

Echo Twelve, landing permission granted. Proceed to landing bay seven oh seven.

The Imperial shuttle drifted slowly through the cloud cover, its wings jostled by the heavy thick air. Red dust thrown up by the industrial exchange outlets down on the surface swirled into the engines, causing the rotor-blades to shudder. Wind howled around the tiny craft, as if daemons of the air competed to swallow it.

Inquisitor Anselm watched the red crosshairs of the nav-com playing across the face of the pilot as he struggled to keep the shuttle on its computer-assisted course. The pilot's right hand was jacked into the shuttle's controls and his bio-eye scanned the clouds for the first lights of the landing bay. Technobabble issued from the cabin speakers as the cogitators spoke to the pilot at a rate of several thousand words mixed with binary codes a minute.

Looking into the swirling maelstrom outside the shuttle's forward screens, he was surprised to see his own reflection staring back at him. A craggy face, weathered by long tours of duty in the Emperor's service made him look older than his years. Long-service studs embedded above his eyes glinted in the winking lights from the console. A shock of close-cropped white hair, dark, hooded eyes, an imperious nose added to his imposing figure, made people think carefully before crossing him. He knew full well the advantage it gave him.

Gazing at himself like this made him uncomfortable, and he turned away. He felt impatience grip him, and he forced himself to stay calm. It was a long time since he'd last seen Cantor, many years, and he freely admitted that he was looking forward to seeing his old friend. But that wasn't the only reason he was pleased to have been assigned this investigation. There was something else, the opportunity to investigate a crime at the very limits of Imperial jurisdiction. Only a short hop from unexplored space itself. He'd never travelled this far before, and now he was entering the atmosphere of Barathrum, a planet that despite years of extensive archaeological investigation, was still a mystery to Imperium scholars. Who knew what may happen this far from the centre of Imperial space? Not that this sort of thing meant anything to an Imperial Inquisitor, but at the back of his mind, he knew that heading such an investigation could propel him along the road leading to the highest echelons of the Inquisition.

The shuttle docked, and the pilot unplugged himself from the console, pale from the concentration needed for their landing. Anselm unbuckled himself, and felt his seat relax, its shape melting away from his body. The shuttle's hatch opened with a hiss of compressed air, and as he walked down the rampway, his senses were assaulted with the smell of ozone, oil, metal and industrial solvents. His enhanced olfactory system idly recognised a dozen different chemical compounds, but before his brain had time to register them, he heard his name being called.

'Anselm! Anselm! I'm so glad you've made it.'

He looked over to the double doors facing the shuttle hanger. A tall thin man approached, dressed in brown robes with a leather apron from which hung tools, calibrating instruments, and various optical measures. His face was flushed, and he was sweating slightly. They gripped each other's forearms in an old comradely gesture. Cantor indicated that they should walk, and they boarded the enclosed monorail pod that he'd just emerged from.

As the monorail slowly accelerated, Anselm was the first to voice what he was thinking.

'Cantor, it's good to see you. It has been a long time. It saddens me that after all these years, we only get the chance to meet on such an ominous occasion.'

'You've read the transcripts? There is something unnatural happening. I'm glad you are here.'

'It's affected you deeply.' It was a statement, not a question. 'You look flushed. Have you not been sleeping? You look uneasy.'

'No, my sleep is fine. You always were an apothecary first and foremost. But that is not why I am uneasy.'

Cantor reached out and stabbed a finger at the panel of buttons by the door. The monorail slowed, and a light started flashing on the console.

Anselm looked at him. 'What is it? Is there something you need to tell me? Remember that I am the Emperor's ear here. Speak freely.'

Cantor lowered his voice. 'There is something you should know. You are not the only member of the Emperor's Inquisition here on Barathrum.'

Anselm felt something clench in his stomach. 'What do you mean?' he demanded.

His friend paused, and at that moment, the pod slowed to a stop, the doors sliding gently open on a waft of pneumatic air.

The inquisitor stepped out into a long room. At one end was a huge window, filling the whole wall. Silhouetted against the setting sun were two figures, one bulky, the other slight. Anselm strode towards the figures, and as he approached, the pair turned round.

Surprise stopped Anselm in his tracks, but he made an effort to steady himself.

'Grogan! What in the Emperor's name are you doing here?'

The tall man smiled a smile that made Anselm's blood boil. His smaller companion looked confused. He recovered himself quickly, and bowed to Anselm in greeting, a half bow of respect to an equal. Anselm returned the gesture, never taking his eyes of Grogan.

Inquisitor Grogan was tall, taller than Anselm and many years older. His eyes were cold, and seemed fixed on the middle distance, as if permanently watching out across the broad expanse of tundra that comprised his home planet had fixed his gaze far away; a long moustache drooped on either side of his lips, giving him a permanently sour expression. He wore rough clothes tied together with an immense belt from which hung a myriad of tools, knives and weapons, along with devices best left unrecognised. It was if he wanted to make it clear that he would brook no nonsense of the kind that flourished in courts and palaces across the galaxy. He had a reputation for harshness and inflexibility that Anselm could attest to and that reputation had no doubt preceded his arrival on Barathrum. No wonder Cantor was nervous.

'So,' the smaller man started, 'you two know each other?'

Grogan turned to his companion. 'Anselm was a pupil of mine. When he was first elevated to the rank of inquisitor adept, he was entrusted into my care.'

'That was many years ago,' Anselm cut in, and then stopped, angry with himself. It was a long time ago, long enough for him to have worked through the anger that his time under Grogan's tutelage had left him. He continued. 'The inquisitor and I have worked together before. We know each other's methods well. Our differing approaches will no doubt cover all the possibilities in this situation.' He gave Grogan a meaningful look and was relieved to see Grogan back down. The man merely grunted in reply and indicated the man standing at his side. 'Anselm, this is Eremet. He is the Master Explorator in charge of the work here on Barathrum.'

Eremet bowed, and extended one hand to Anselm. His grip was strong, the skin rough and weathered. The Explorator's face was open, friendly. 'The holy Inquisition is most welcome on Barathrum,' he said. 'You read Cantor's report?'

'I have,' Anselm replied. 'But I would hear it from your mouth. There are many ways to tell the same story.'

'Follow me then. Perhaps when you see, you will understand more than if you simply listen.' Eremet led them through a set of double doors and down a short flight of stairs. He pushed open a plain door and they entered a clean bright room that smelled of antiseptic. Racks of surgical instruments lined the walls, and an operating table stood under bright theatre lights. Behind a green cloth screen, just visible from the doorway, stood a row of gurneys, each holding a shrouded figure.

The Master Explorator moved the screen aside and stood beside the first body. With a flick of his hand, he removed the shroud from the figure. Despite himself, Anselm felt his stomach heave. He was no stranger to battle and the hideous wounds that resulted from close combat. But this was no war-wound. The face had been mutilated almost beyond recognition, great gouging marks like those of a wild beast scoured the face from top to bottom. The jaw had been broken by the violence of the attack, and the mouth hung open, making it look like the corpse had been interrupted in the process of screaming. One eye had been destroyed, the socket torn across, but the other stared out between curtains of ragged flesh.

Eremet's voice was matter of fact. 'We have lost six of our company in the past eight work cycles. The first to go missing, Aleuk, was found in sector four, one of the mid-city areas, then one by one we lost the others, each one deeper and further in towards the heart of the city. And now, Crans, he was working at the furthest point that we have excavated...'

'How big is the city?' asked Anselm. 'All I saw on the flight in was the bunker and the landing bay.'

Eremet laughed. 'That is all you would see. The bunker is in fact the highest part, the spire if you like, for a great city that has sunk beneath the sands of this planet. It

once stood proud above the, but something in ages past made it sink through the sand, and now all that lies above the earth is this part.'

'How far does the city extend?'

'The city stretches underneath us for over five kilometres. We've only mapped the core. The deeper we get, the more spread out it is – we estimate up to ten kilometres in diameter at the deepest points – and the less we know. The city is incredibly complex in design, but Cantor is the best tech-priest explorer there is. Every time we were halted in our efforts, Cantor advised us where to dig next, and, each time, we made such progress that we were able to carry on.

'As I was saying, Aleuk was in sector four, about three kilometres down. Our servitors had just cut into a new area – a lot of the work here involves cutting or digging through debris to reach a new level – and this level was much older. There was less concrete and steel, much of the building was formed from great blocks of hewn stone. The standard of masonry is extraordinarily high, there's hardly a gap between any of the blocks. It's quite astonishing.

'One of our adepts was taking geochron readings, trying to gauge how old the area was. How it happened we haven't been able to discover but one of the blocks from the ceiling must have been loose. It fell, blocking the corridor he was in and cutting the man off from the rest of the team. It was then it happened. He was attacked. The sound of him screaming in pain and fear could be heard from the other side. It was horrible.'

'You were there?' asked Grogan.

'No, I wasn't. I was here in the medi-bay.'

'Alone?'

'Yes.'

What about the other corpses?' asked Grogan.

Silently, Eremit moved from trolley to trolley, pulling back the sheets that covered the forms, until all the corpses lay exposed, side by side in death like a roll-call of the slain. Each of them was terribly torn, the flesh of each flayed back from their musculature and in places bones, cracked and splintered, appeared through the tattered muscles.

'The others disappeared and were found, each one deeper down in the structure of the city. I had to order the complete shutdown of all our operations until you came.'

Anselm cast a critical eye over the display.

'Has the cause of death been established for each?' he asked Eremit.

Grogan snorted. 'I think the cause of death is pretty self-evident. Attack by some sort of wild beast, could be a 'stealer or some other species of 'nid. Something big and dangerous. Look at that one – his arms have been ripped off. Complication of the simple always was one of your....'

He broke off, and turned to Eremit. 'Master explorer, I think this is a clear-cut case of xeno-infestation, type unknown. Unless there's some other evidence to the contrary, I would say this is not a crime-scene. I suggest that, as we're here, we go find your missing tech-priest, hunt whatever's running loose here and move on.'

He turned to Anselm. 'Cantor's already explained to me – the missing techpriest was scheduled to work on some newly discovered archaeotech, in a recently excavated area, sector twenty-eight. I suggest we start looking for him there. Eremit, do you have weapons here?'

'No – this site has been active for years and we've never had any problems with hostiles. It's away from the main trade routes, we have no trouble from pirates or xenomorphs. The Imperial zoologists who surveyed the planet found no indigenous life that posed a threat and the planet itself has a green security rating.'

'Well, we have,' Grogan countered. 'So soon there won't be any indigenous lifeforms around to threaten anyone!' Then he added, as if to himself, 'The Inquisition is a tool of cleansing fire. It's time to light the flame.'

He turned and stalked out of the medi-bay.

'Follow me,' Anselm said and moved swiftly after the inquisitor. They caught up with him in the control room, where he was waiting for Cantor to guide them. The tech-priest handed each of them a torch from a rack, then lead the way out of the control room and towards a pair of lifts. Stopping

only to pull his combat shotgun from his kit bag, Anselm followed him. Once inside, they stood silently while Cantor jabbed at buttons with his finger. The lift doors closed and a gentle humming sound filled the small room. There was a barely perceptible shift as the lift started to descend. There was almost no sensation of falling but Anselm felt his ears popping before the lift came to a gentle halt about a minute later. The doors opened and they moved out into a vast space.

The room was a hall of some kind. It seemed as if it were once some sort of meeting area or place of worship. There had once been fine paintings on the walls, but age and water damage had destroyed them, leaving only mouldering frames. What had once been furniture was now nothing more than splintered timbers and broken masonry, pushed to one side. The dust lay heavy at the edges of the room, but the middle had been worn clean by the countless feet of the archaeotech priests over the years.

They moved down through the hall, Grogan leading, his great strides kicking up dust. Cantor followed, his soft shoes shuffling, and Anselm brought up the rear. They went through a door and found themselves in a broad corridor, almost a road, leading downwards. On either side of them, doors and other corridors lead off into different directions. Burnt out machinery, some of it looking incredibly old, was scattered haphazardly around the area. Doors, broken and hanging off their hinges, sometimes blocked a doorway. Every now and again, they passed some dark staining on the walls or floors. It looked as if oil or some carbonised matter had been spilt there.

They came to a crossroads of sorts, lit by the harsh lights of the exploratory team who had set up permanent illumination across the dig area. High pillars held up the roof, now hung with webs of what looked like the spinnings of some long gone creatures. He could see balconies, mezzanine levels, bridges spanning the void above them. Anselm shuddered. He suddenly realised that they were moving through the heart of what had been a great city, a city to rival in splendour any that he had seen, but now ruined and desolate. In

his mind's eye he could see shops, warehouses, palaces, gardens, roads and walkways, once splendid, now ruined and empty. He noticed marks in the walls from small arms fire, bolter marks and scorches from lasguns. All was quiet and beyond the perimeter of light afforded by the arc-lamps, he could see nothing. He gripped the comforting bulk of his shotgun, holding it ready as he scanned the darkness. The beam from his torch wavered as he settled the gun's stock into his hip.

Great loops of black cabling snaked back the way they had come, no doubt supplying power to those digging deeper in the bowels of the city. Arc lamps threw stark shadows, and as they passed each lamp, Anselm saw the silhouette of Grogan rear up the wall towards him and then sink down again as the Inquisitor strode past, his powerful bulk seeming to leap at him.

His skin prickled. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw movement. He turned his head, shining the strong beam of his torch into the blackness, but there was nothing there, only an empty hole where one part of a wall had collapsed. He turned his attention back to the group.

'Do we know anything about the city, its people?' Anselm asked Cantor.

'Nothing at all,' he replied. 'The city itself is very old, but apart from the buildings themselves, which you can see around you, there is very little that it has revealed to us. It is a bit of a mystery – there is nothing in the ancient chronicles about a city or even a civilisation this far away from the galactic core. Whatever was here was either well hidden from the main routes or kept themselves to themselves. I would have posited some sort of pirate community or frontier world but the size and complexity of this city denies that. There is almost no evidence of how they lived other than the buildings. There is much damage, it looks like a heavy battle was fought here but over what we cannot tell. The centuries hide a lot of evidence – we found bones but they'd almost worn away to nothing, clothes had rotted, even metal had rusted away.'

Anselm shuddered. He couldn't get rid of the feeling that they were being watched but he could see no sign of anything nearby. The dark windows of buildings seemed to gaze at him blankly but every

now and then he felt that something was watching him from behind stone buttresses or broken walls. He shook his head, clearing the visions. He wouldn't allow himself to start imagining that he could see back into the city's living past. He looked ahead. They were coming to a narrowing of the way, almost a tunnel.

He concentrated on Cantor's monologue.

'Much of this part of the city was sealed off by rockfall, we had to excavate heavily in order to get past it, as sensors indicated that the city continued for some way beyond it. Took some doing, I can tell you. This rock's hard as adamantium. Wore away hundreds of drillbits, but in the end.... Ah, here we are. As you can see, what we found was well worth the effort.'

They had come to the end of the tunnel. In front of them stood a wall, carved from massive blocks of stone, fitted together with such precision that only the thinnest line separated the blocks from one another. At the base of the wall was an opening, barely two metres high, and only half the width. Surrounding the opening was an inscription in a language they could not read.

'The translation has defeated us so far; it was sent to the Ecclesiarchy for translation but we heard nothing back,' Cantor said, rather sheepishly. 'There was a stone blocking the doorway. I'm afraid we had to use compact charges to remove it. The interesting thing, you'll notice is that none of the other blocks were scarred by the explosion. The door-block was made of a softer stone than the wall. Why, we've no idea, but we sent the fragments back for analysis all the same.'

Anselm had to stoop to get through the doorway, and when he lifted his head on the other side, he felt his breath catch in amazement. Ahead of him, sloping down, illuminated in the soft light of hundreds of glow-globes, the corridor stretched ahead for what seemed like kilometres. The passageway was barely wider than the door they had entered it by, but the roof stretched hundreds of metres above him. On the floor was a soft fine dust that stirred as he stepped through it.

Grogan grunted. 'Impressive,' he conceded, striding forward, his cloak billowing behind him, throwing up

miniature dust-storms. 'But we've no time for sightseeing. My work is fighting heretics, not playing historian. This stuff should all be left underground where it belongs. The Imperium is best guarded with the Emperor's word and a hellgun, not with ancient trinkets. In the meantime I want to find your missing priest as quickly as possible. Or the corpse,' he added darkly. 'If there is something alive down here, I want it hunted down and exterminated so that we can get off this rock.'

Cantor huffed. 'Come on,' Anselm said. 'Until we find whatever's out there, it may strike again.' Cantor led the way down the immense corridor. Anselm gazed up in wonder. The roof soared away into darkness above him. About halfway along, there was a dark strip of rock all the way across the floor and reaching high up the walls on either side.

Cantor noticed him looking at it. 'That's hardened basalt,' he commented. 'It cut the corridor in half. Our cogitators have surmised that at one time a wall of molten lava bisected this corridor, held in place by the Emperor knows what. In time it cooled and hardened into a perfect wall of basalt. We had to cut through it with high intensity laser drills. The basalt extends for hundreds of metres in every direction as if the wall stretched far into the rock like a protective barrier. We knew once we passed it that we were reaching the heart of what had been the city – we think it may have acted as some sort of heat sink or repository for their energy needs. What we do know is that there is still much molten magma near this part of the dig, held in check by the great weight of rock.'

They passed the ring of basalt and after some time, the passageway levelled out. Soon afterwards, it opened up into a room, perhaps ten metres wide. Machinery lay on wheeled trolleys, cables and unlit glow-globes were stacked in piles around the room, and there was the noise of humming. Anselm guessed that the machinery was pumping fresh air into the room and taking away spent air. Above them, balconies overlooked the room, and there was the faint sound of chains swinging in an imperceptible breeze.

Cantor said 'This is the heart of Barathrum. It is the deepest our excavations have brought us.' Then he stopped.

The body lay slumped face down against workbench. There was a pool of blood around his head, and his hair was matted with it. Blood and brain matter was spattered against the walls. Grogan motioned Anselm forwards.

'Anselm,' he said. 'You're the chiurgeon, if I remember correctly. What can you tell us?'

Anselm moved forwards, stepping over the outstretched legs of the corpse. He leaned forward and gently pulled the body round. As it slumped over onto its back, he gasped in horror. The man's front had been torn apart, the chest a gaping cavity, arms hanging limply from sleeves of lacerated skin. Dark holes gazed into nothingness where his eyes had been, and blood had oozed from the sockets, drying into black crusted rivulets across his cheeks.

'I can tell little from here,' he said. 'We must take him to the medi-bay. I will examine him there.'

He turned his face away from the shattered corpse and examined the room in which they had found him. The walls were made of small mud bricks stacked one on top the other and sealed with some sort of rough cement. There was a glow-globe in the corner and he played it over the wall, the flickering light tracing demonic patterns on the rough brickwork. Apart from the blood spray near the corpse, there were no other marks on the wall.

Except...

'What's this?' Anselm ran his fingers over one part of the wall. The bricks seemed to be rougher here, the finish less clean. His fingertips found a line, near the floor, almost imperceptible, and followed it up until it was about half a metre above his head. Then it turned sharply, at ninety degrees and continued horizontally for about a metre.

'A door,' he breathed. 'Cantor, look at this.' The techpriest came close and peered at the line.

'You're right,' he said. 'A door. We'd have never have seen this if you hadn't noticed it.'

Grogan barked at Eremet. 'Get servitors down here. I want this area sealed off and I want to know what's behind this wall.'

Eremet nodded. 'I will see to it, inquisitor.'

Anselm made a circuit of the room, remembering everything in case a clue came to him later. Then, reluctantly, they lifted the corpse and wrapped it in a length of tarpaulin, before placing it on one of the machinery trolleys that stood to one side. Anselm, his mind already on the work ahead, guided the trolley as its internal suspensors moved it forwards.

As they passed once more though the labyrinthine passages of the dead city, Anselm again felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise. Out of the corner of his eye, in the dark passages and openings that they passed, he could swear he saw eyes glinting at him, hundreds of eyes staring, unblinking. But each time he turned his head, his torch illuminating the darkness, he saw nothing, only the empty blackness of the tunnels. He was sure it was only his imagination, but he thought he could hear laughter; laughter dusty, dry and alien. He shook his head and the sound disappeared.

The tension must be getting to him, the horrific corpse they had found and the knowledge that Grogan was once again watching him. What if this was some sort of test? What if Grogan had been sent to report back on how he was handling this enquiry, whether he was showing sufficient zeal and devotion?

What if... What if, he told himself angrily, you concentrate on the task at hand and leave the worries for another time. He had a post-mortem to carry out and despite the gruesome nature of the task, he was looking forward to it; a chance to pit his keen intelligence against something that would eventually yield up its secrets.

It took some time before they reached the apotecary's bay. They placed the body on the operating table and unwrapped the tarpaulin. Cantor and Eremet stood back against the wall, trying not to watch, and Grogan pulled a high lab stool up close.

Donning a pair of transparent surgical gloves, Anselm began to work, cutting the shredded remains of the man's clothing away from the body. He muttered to himself as he did so, a habit from the days

when he had a med-servitor to record the results of the post-mortem. 'Hmm, number of deep incisions on the torso, mostly vertical... some bruising of the solar plexus... let's see, ribs cracked on left hand side, heavy blow to the shoulder, no bruising. Most interesting...' His voice died away as he reached across to pick up a pair of oculators and a small surgical pick. He leaned across the body and tentatively lifted up a flap of skin on the corpse's chest. 'Most interesting,' he confirmed as he squinted through the oculators.

'What is it?' demanded Grogan.

'Not ready to say... I just need to...' Anselm mumbled half to himself. He transferred his attention to the man's ruined face. Taking a pad of cotton, he soaked it in surgical alcohol and began to wipe the dried blood from the skin. Under the blood, the slashes were livid, purple and swollen. Cantor looked away and made a strangled gargling sound in his throat. Eremet looked pale. Grogan watched stoically, occasionally rubbing the vein at his temple. In the now clean face, the corpse's empty eye sockets glared evilly and despite their lack of occupants, Grogan felt they were watching them.

It was some time before Anselm spoke again: 'Now this is most interesting...'

This time, Grogan lost his patience. He stood up and leaned over the body on the table. 'For Emperor's sake, what are you muttering about?'

Anselm pulled off the oculators and stripped the gloves from his fingers.

'This is not the work of a zoomorph, a beast, at least not in the way we thought. These slash marks are certainly caused by claws of some kind, though the exact identity of the creature that caused them is beyond my knowledge. However, they are not the cause of death, nor the most interesting part of the examination. Look at the man's head, the area around the eyes, and tell me what you see.'

'This is insufferable,' Grogan declared, but bent his head until his nose was almost touching the ripped nasal cavity of the dead man.

'Throne of Earth!' he exclaimed. Cantor and Eremet jumped up as if they had been stung and crowded round.

'What is it?' the Explorator demanded.

Grogan jumped in before Anselm could open his mouth. 'Don't you see?' he said. 'Look at the eye sockets. It seems like the eyes have been ripped out, but look more closely. It's not just the eyes that have gone, it's the bone around the eye socket too.'

'And if you look through the oculator,' continued Anselm, 'the eyes weren't torn out. They were removed. Something, or someone, removed those eyes with great precision, using some kind of device that removed them at high speed and great accuracy. There are hardly any radial injury marks on the rest of the skull round the wound – this was done with something incredibly sharp – whatever else, I would say this man's eyes were intact when they were removed. But what kind of creature takes the eyes and leaves the rest of the body?'

Anselm ran his fingers through his cropped hair and started to pace the room. He suddenly stopped. 'What about the eyes on the other bodies?' he suddenly exclaimed. He strode to the screen behind which the bodies lay on their gurneys. He rapidly pulled back the sheets and then stopped in disappointment. Whatever the extent of their injuries and cause of death, it was clear to see that the eyes of the other bodies were either intact or at least extant.

He turned to face the others. 'I need to be alone,' he said. 'I need to think about this. I will examine the other bodies. There may be some clue as to how they died that may help us.'

Cantor and Eremet bowed towards the Inquisitor and left. Grogan remained.

'Inquisitor,' Anselm asserted. 'I must do this alone. I need to deliver these souls into the Emperor's care and ask their spirits to guide me in finding their killer. To do that I must be alone.'

Grogan looked suspiciously at him. 'What is this? Is this some sort of ritual?'

'No, it is merely that I must examine the other bodies, but I need to have my mind clear to accept whatever the results tell me, no matter how strange or confusing they may seem to my brain. I just need quiet.'

Grogan seemed to consider this. 'Very well,' he said. 'But I want a full debrief.'

'Before you speak to the others,' he added, as he turned and strode out of the room.



IT WAS SOME hours later that Grogan heard a knock on the door of the habmod that had been assigned to him. He put away the documents he had been reading and opened the door. Anselm stood there, looking tired but alert.

'May I enter?' he asked. Grogan stood aside and Anselm entered, seating himself at the table strewn with transcripts and documents. Grogan swept them up into a pile and sat down opposite him.

'Well, what have you found?' he asked.

'This is a lot darker than you or I suspected,' the inquisitor began.

Grogan's face twitched and Anselm could have sworn he saw the flicker of a smile pass across the older man's craggy features. Nothing gave Grogan more pleasure, Anselm remembered, than having an enemy, preferably a self-confessed heretic, that he could pin all his fiery, destructive, righteous energies on.

'I've examined all the bodies. Apart from Crans, they all seem to have died in a savage and frenzied attack. They were literally torn apart. Whatever it was that killed them, it was hugely strong, fast as a tyranid, but man-sized, bipedal, with only two arms, and legs for locomotion, not attack. The attack was frenzied, as I say, but I would say from the pattern of the lacerations, it was carried out by someone who was not. In other words, this is not the work of a beast, nor of a deranged madman, but a madman who is cold, calculated and very cunning.'

'I don't follow. How can a killer be mad and yet not mad? You're not making sense?'

'There is something strange about the bodies. They are each missing part of their anatomy. This is something that had been missed in all previous examinations but I made the connection after examining Crans. Even in the case of the body that was missing its arms, while the fact of the

missing arm was obvious, what was less so was that the arm had been removed, carefully and surgically, after death. It was amputated, not ripped off.'

Grogan had become still, his jaw twitching slightly as Anselm spoke.

'We are missing a heart, brain, eyes, a number of bones and many kilos of muscle tissue from various parts of the body. In one case the face had been torn away, but in such a way that it would have been undamaged by the removal. The question I put to myself was why.'

'And what did you come up with?'

'I wasn't able to come up with an answer, until I made a final discovery which meant that the answer to the riddle became secondary to the real truth about what's happening here on Barathrum. This mark was burned into the back of the eye socket of Techpriest Crans.'

Anselm leaned over and thrust a thin data-slate towards Grogan. The older inquisitor took it and thumbed the activation button. The data-slate glowed pale and illuminated the man's face from below as he gazed at it. Anselm watched as an image, upside down from his perspective at the other side of the table, began to coalesce on the slate's screen. It was a symbol, dark and clear-edged, yet hard to see, as if it was being inspected under ultraviolet light, or another wavelength just beyond the limits of human eyesight. He knew that he wouldn't have been able to describe it if asked. The symbol seemed to twist and turn in on itself like a writhing creature, yet Anselm knew that logically it could not move; it was a snapshot captured on the data-slate, yet it was an image with both meaning and power. Despite himself, he shivered.

'So,' Grogan stated, the word slow and ponderous, hanging in the air between them. 'Chaos has come to Barathrum.'



THERE WAS A knock at the door. Grogan thumbed the slate clear and slipped the inert machine into the voluminous sleeve of his robe and called

out: 'Enter.' The door opened a crack and the anxious face of Eremet appeared.

'Your eminences,' he began. 'I think you had better come with me.'

'Has there been another death?' Grogan asked, standing up.

'No, but there has been a discovery. Please follow me.'

'Where are we going?' Grogan asked. Out of the corner of his eye, Anselm could see his companion's right hand wandering towards the holster where he kept his hellgun strapped tight to his thigh.

'Inquisitor Anselm's discovery of the door was followed up, as per orders.' The Excavator seemed nervous now, as if the whole investigation was starting to take on a life of its own and was running away from his control. Anselm felt for him. The man's job was risky, but the kinds of risks he faced were ones he could normally tackle – here he was now, faced with an investigation with not one but two of the Emperor's finest inquisitors, one of whom was evidently getting increasingly trigger-happy.

Eremet lead them quickly through the pathways and tunnels towards the area where they had discovered the body of the unfortunate tech-priest. This time Anselm felt no eyes upon him and he was glad. He felt a rising excitement within him. They were starting to make some headway. He had done well to put together the clues held in the bodies of the slain. It was a difficult conclusion to have come to but it held up. If things worked out on Barathrum, there would be nothing standing in his way. Barathrum would be simply the beginning. He would be elevated through the ranks of his brothers and he would lead them. Those who stood in his way would be quashed...

He shook his head to clear it and forced his mind back to the present. He was tired. He had not slept since leaving Atrium two days ago. After they saw whatever it was that Eremet was bringing them to, he would rest for a couple of hours. Or at least take some stim to keep him going and risk the attendant headaches.



THE ROOM WHERE they had found the body was unchanged since they removed the body. Anselm could still see the spatters of blood and the dark shadow where the body of the tech-priest had lain in a pool of its own blood. Now, however the single glow-globe had been replaced by an array of harsh arc-lamps, casting their stark light on the scene. To his left stood a doorway, in the place where his fingers had traced out the line in the mud bricks. The doorway lead into a room that was filled with lambent light that seemed to create, and then chase away, shadows on the walls. Eremet stood at the side of the doorway and extended his arm, almost as if he were inviting them in.

Anselm took a deep breath, almost without knowing why and stepped through the doorway, Grogan close behind him. The first thing he noticed was Cantor, locked in conversation with a recorder, the servitor a mass of audio-visual feeds, spectrometers and devices for measuring humidity and air density. Cantor looked up as the inquisitors entered and ushered the servitor away. It bowed briefly and then went back to its work. Cantor's face was aglow with excitement as he faced his old friend.

'I would say congratulations if you had been a member of my team,' he said. 'You seem to have stumbled onto some sort of heart of our enterprise, I would say, no?' He gestured expansively around him.

Anselm gazed around him in wonder. The room was huge, a great pillared hall, the trunks of the pillars like a forest of great trees. The ceiling was high and seemed to glow with an angry red light, almost as if it were some sort of burning sea. It was this ceiling that lit the room and the waves of light washing across it had caused the play of light and shadow that Anselm had noticed when he had entered. Suddenly, he realised what it was – lava, molten rock, swirling above them, held in place by who knew what artifice. They stood under a lake of fire that swirled in the air above them.

Ahead of him there were great double doors, almost twenty metres tall, each door perhaps five or six metres wide. It seemed to be made from what looked like beaten copper, or perhaps bronze – it glowed dully in the reflection of the ceiling. Around the door were carved great hieroglyphics in a

language that was unfamiliar to him. The glyphs were mainly pictorial, with lines and circles making up the remainder. Although he couldn't read them, they didn't look alien and he was relieved.

He noticed other tech-priests in the room, some directing servitors who lugged great chests of instruments, trailing wires, struggling under the immense weight. Others were taking notes on data-slates, still others appeared to be transcribing some of the hieroglyphics. He watched idly as one of them approached the great copper doors and reached out to touch them.

There was a high pitched hum and a beam of intense red light erupted from a point above the doors and focused on the tech-priest. The luminescence washing over the ceiling darkened momentarily as if someone had thrown ink into a bowl of bright liquid. The tech-priest writhed as he was caught in the beam of light, a silent scream forced from his lips. Then the light was gone and the man collapsed, like a puppet Anselm had once seen on Darcia that had had its strings cut. Grogan ran over to the man and prodded him with the toe of his boot. Nothing happened. He knelt down and pressed his finger to the man's neck.

'Dead!' he announced.

He raised his voice so that all could hear him. 'I want no one to touch this door. I want these glyphs read and deciphered and delivered to me in my quarters within the hour. Anselm, I want to speak with you. Privately.' He turned to Eremet. 'Get this place sealed off.'

Cantor faced him, apoplectic with rage.

'Inquisitor! This area is under the jurisdiction of the Adeptus Mechanicus. There is so much to learn here, from the inscriptions, from the structures here. You cannot make such an order. We must lose no time.'

Grogan refused to be countermanded. 'On pain of death, tech-priest, I order you to stay away from here. And that applies to everyone.' He whirled on his heels and stalked out of the room.



ANSELM FACED Grogan across the table in the younger man's hab-mod. The senior inquisitor looked as if he was barely containing his anger. Anselm knew that look. It meant that Grogan smelled the stink of corruption and knew exactly how to deal with it. It also meant that he was not prepared to discuss any alternative.

'I'm ordering immediate evacuation of Barathrum and requesting back up from an Astartes kill-team. I want Terminator squads to scour this place and if they find nothing I will be recommending full Exterminatus. Barathrum is a threat to the Imperium. The Imperium is a city built behind high walls and these frontier systems are the Unknown beyond. It is our job to defend those walls and what shelters behind them, whatever the cost. If there is the influence of chaos at work here, then I will stamp it out. It is unfortunate but necessary – I will be demanding that the Explorator mission here be relieved of its duties and subjected to rigorous review.'

Anselm knew full well what that meant. He had been party to Grogan's reviews before, when he was an acolyte. It meant death for those who confessed, and torture for those who did not. Until they did. They all confessed in the end.

'Grogan, we must investigate further. If there is a manifestation of Chaos here, we must get to the bottom of it, certainly, but we should root out its heart, not destroy the body just to get at the tumour. There is something unspeakably evil here but there is also great good in what we can learn from this planet. You heard Cantor – the archaeotech finds are immeasurable, there may be standard template devices that the Adeptus Mechanicus have only dreamed about. You cannot take the decision to destroy all that these men have worked and died for simply because we have only just begun to understand what has been happening here.'

'That is weakness, Anselm. Everything contrary to the rule of the Imperium is heresy and there can be no exceptions. I'm surprised you do not remember that after what happened on Tantalus. That is what happens when you show weakness.'

Anselm looked into the dark eyes of Grogan. His voice shook with anger.

'I did not show weakness, Grogan, as you well know. It is not weakness to show restraint. What you did on Tantalus was unprecedented and unnecessary. To destroy a planet because of a insurrection that was limited to one city was arrogant, and typical of your approach.'

Grogan's eyes remained enigmatic, unreadable. 'I seem to recall, Anselm, that you were in charge of suppressing that insurrection. A charge you expressly failed to carry out. I did what I did only when the rebellion threatened the stability of the whole star system.'

Anselm kept his voice calm. There was no point in getting angry with Grogan. The man's icy manner would never crack, and Anselm knew from bitter experience that if he lost his temper, he would be the loser. He took a deep breath, and when he spoke, his voice was again calm. 'May I remind you, Grogan, that I had only been on Tantalus for four days when your agents had me pulled out. Of course I failed to halt the insurrection, I hardly had time to open my office.'

'Tantalus was under your jurisdiction. The insurrection should have been crushed. Instantly. Diplomacy is only useful after force has driven the other side to the table. Alone, it is a tool for the weak, for effete Imperial ambassadors. The Inquisition is not a tool, it is a force in itself. As I'm sure you remember.' Grogan breathed in deeply.

Anselm forced a tight smile to his lips. 'I remember only too well, inquisitor; your classes made a great impression on us all. But perhaps we should concentrate less on what happened in the past, and more on the present.'

There was a shuffle of robes as Grogan stood up. He checked his chronometer. 'I have ordered that no one leave their quarters tonight. Barathrum has moved into its night cycle. There is nothing we can do until light, when the planet has turned its face once more towards the core systems and we can send word back to the Ecclesiarchy.'

'Yes.' Anselm's silence swallowed up the end of the word, and dismissed his erstwhile tutor. The old man gathered up his robes and left, closing the door after him, leaving Anselm exhausted. Why was it

that every time he spoke to Grogan, he felt himself back in the Scholarium, being tested on Imperial ethics or some obscure matter from a legal codex?

He moved his weapons case from his bunk and set it on the table. He lay back on the sleeping pallet and closed his eyes, allowing his mind to clear, leaving it open to thought.



ANSELM AWOKE and looked at the glowing chronometer next to his pallet. He had been asleep for only a matter of minutes but something had woken him. There was a strange scratching sound, almost at the edge of his hearing. No, not scratching, more like a shuffling, soft fabric being drawn across polished stone. He shook his head and sat up. The sound wasn't coming from inside his hab mod, it was coming from outside, in the corridor.

He moved across to the door, silent on bare feet, rubbing his eyes with tiredness. Opening the door a crack, he looked out into the corridor. There was nothing there. The corridor was empty. He closed the door again, but this time he locked it. He lay back on his pallet and closed his eyes.



ANSELM WAS dreaming. In his dream, he was gliding through the labyrinth below the dig site. Again, he felt eyes on him, many eyes watching him as he moved through the darkness. Although he had no torch with him, he could see as if it were day, and in his dream, the darkness and complexity of the labyrinth held no fear for him. He came at last to the room where they had found the body. It sat slumped against the wall, its front stained with blood and the empty hollow eye sockets seeming to watch him, a dark fire burning within them.

To his left was the doorway cleared by the servitors and he felt himself being drawn towards it. He passed through, but instead of the great hall with its brass doors and pillars, he found himself in a throne room. Warm light streamed over him. Before him stood a dais with a throne on it. The throne was enormous, bigger than a building, and on the throne sat a great figure, haloed in golden light. In his dream, Anselm knew that this was – praise be the holy throne of Terra – the Emperor himself, great father of mankind.

His heart soared and he felt himself sink to his knees. He looked up into the ancient wise face of the saviour of mankind... and saw it swim before his eyes, seem to melt and flow, and there on the throne sat a beast, the face of a hyena, eyes glowing red with immeasurable evil, the muzzle long, creased in a bestial snarl or smile, he couldn't tell which. The creature stood, its rich robes sweeping the floor. It held out one arm and Anselm could see fine rings glittering on dark fingers. The creature gazed at him.

'Anselm!' it said, the voice deep, dark, rich, evil. 'Anselm, my servant, you have come to me. Anselm!' The voice drove into his skull and his heart began hammering as if it would burst from his ribcage. And then the scene faded and the hammering of his heart became the hammering of someone banging on his door and calling 'Anselm, Anselm! Open the door!'



HE LEAPT UP, dazed with sleep his fingers instinctively reaching for his shotgun.

'Who is it?' he called.

'Eremet,' came the reply. 'A transmission has arrived from the Ecclesiarchy with the translation of the hieroglyphs.'

Anselm opened the door cautiously.

'Come in. What does it say?' Eremet came in, looking behind him before he closed the door. Silently, he handed a data-slate over to Anselm.

'The transmission was coded and bears the highest seal of your Ordo. I cannot read it.'

Anselm thumbed the power rune and the screen lit up. There was a brief moment while the slate read the print of his thumb and verified his identity. He entered his personal code number, then a jumble of hieroglyphics swam across the screen, resolving themselves into neat rows. Slowly, starting at the top, the glyphs began to change into the regular characters of High Gothic text.

He read:

'Inquisitor Anselm, this transcription is for your eyes only. What it contains is reserved for the highest level of the Ordo and the Ecclesiarchy. The information cannot be revealed to any outside our order.'

'The hieroglyphs of Barathrum have been translated as follows:

'Let it be known that we, the Mugati, humans, descendants of the tribes of the Ilatrum, claimed this world for our people in the name of the Holy Emperor. The land was cultivated and great cities we built in his name. We grew strong, our people were brave; many journeyed beyond the stars amongst their brothers in the armies of the Imperium. Our trade stretched beyond this system. We were a proud people. That pride was our downfall. The eye of the Evil One turned its gaze upon us.

'When the warp storms came, we were cut off from our brothers who had left to protect other parts of the galaxy. For years, we trembled in fear as foul raiders came out of the Immaterium to attack us. Our cities fell, one by one and we drew back to our capital. Here was the scene of our last battle.

'We fought hard and pushed the foe back, but then it called up Szarach'il, foul servant of their gods and terrible was the destruction he wrought. Our city could not stand against such a foe, and so it was that our world teetered on the brink of oblivion.

'The final battle took place deep in the catacombs beneath the city. Our finest warriors fought a desperate battle, until at last Szarach'il himself stood face to face against Amaril, leader of all our people, brother of the Holy Inquisition. Amaril knew that Szarach'il could not be killed, nor

banished by his powers, diminished as they were by the months of battle. Instead, in a final act that destroyed his mortal body, he bound Szarach'il behind great doors of promethium, sealing them with words of great power such that he should never be released.

'Our planet is destroyed, our people no more. I, Dramul, last of the Mugati, have caused these words to be carved on the prison walls that any who read them will know.'

Anselm felt his heart grow cold. What have we uncovered here, he thought.

Then he suddenly realised why he was here. The Ecclesiarchy had already sent one inquisitor to investigate the events on Barathrum. Why send another? Unless his Ordo had known, somehow, what Barathrum meant. Their archives were endless and ancient beyond memory. Did they send him to Barathrum to prevent Grogan, staunch puritan that he was, from destroying all trace of the daemon from existence? And in the process banish to nothingness all that the Mugati had learnt from their battle, the ancient powers that had bound the daemon in its abyssal prison?

'Where is Grogan?' he demanded.

'He is not in his mod, excellency,' replied Eremet.

Anselm turned and opened his weapons case. Inset in red velvet was an ancient sword. The handle was made from fine wood wound with hand-tooled leather. He released it from its cradle, held it up in front of his face, depressing a button on the handle to test the blade. The metal of the blade hummed and the cutting edge shimmered. He released the button and the humming stopped, the blade inert.

'Come on!' he said to the terrified explorer. 'Let's go and find them. I know where he is.'



AS ANSELM dreamed, Grogan paced his room, trying to wear off his impatience at having to wait until he could call down divine retribution on Barathrum.

He stopped, hearing a soft shuffling sound outside his mod. He opened the door a crack and saw Cantor as he faded into the darkness at the end of the corridor. He called after him, but there was no answer. Where was the fool going? And after he had specifically forbade anyone from venturing forth tonight. Grogan turned back to grab his hellgun, and snatched up his chainsword at the same time. By the time he reached the end of the corridor, Cantor had disappeared. But Grogan knew where he would be heading. The damn fool scholar was going to go and investigate the glyphs.

He followed the footprints they had made earlier until he came to the long straight passage. As he approached the room with the door, he heard the sound of soft chanting. Alarmed, he gripped his hellgun tightly in his left hand, the right fingering release on his chainsword. Silently, it began to whirr, the light from the glow-globes flickering off its spinning serrated surface.

He stood at the side of the doorway and cautiously peered in.

Inside he could see the great pillars reaching up, their surfaces shifting in the light from the ceiling. Shadows pooled around their bases, anchoring each pillar in its own plot of darkness. The light caressed the carven script set into the walls surrounding the door.

And settled on the figure of Cantor, tech-priest and disciple of the Adeptus Mechanicus as he stood in front of the great copper doors, his arms raised in a gesture of welcome, ancient words spilling from his throat.

'El'ach mihar, cun malaas, an ach! Szarach'il cun malaas!'

The words hung in the air like incense in a temple, and the sound of them hurt Grogan's ears. They were unholy words, words of summoning, words of power. Words of evil. The voice of Chaos.

In front of Cantor the glyphs carved into the great beaten copper doors began to glow, tendrils of luminescence flickering over the images and jumping from rune to rune. The lighted ceiling began to darken, storm clouds the colour of bruised flesh forming in the artificial sky. A tremor shook the earth and the dust rose on the floor at

Grogan's feet. Cantor's chanting grew louder.

Grogan stepped out from behind the door, his hellgun pointed straight at the tech-priest's back and bellowed: 'In the name of the Emperor, foul hell fiend, cease your chanting or die.'

What happened next was the very last thing he expected. Cantor ceased his chanting and turned round. His eyes were black pits of darkness, the pupils enlarged hugely, filling his sockets. The face was a rictus of concentration, his mouth wide in the midst of a chant. Then Grogan saw his hands. Where his fingers should be, claws that gleamed like metal had burst from his hands. He could see the tips, glistening with blood.

Cantor lowered his arms, and held them out towards Grogan.

'Welcome, inquisitor!' the mouth hissed but the voice was not Cantor's. It was dark, dry, dusty, the voice of one imprisoned for aeons and not used to forming words aloud. 'You are just in time to welcome me at the moment of my release. But there is still the final invocation, and you cannot be allowed to prevent that.'

The creature gestured to one side and Grogan turned to look in the direction.

From the shadow of one of the pillars emerged a monstrosity from the very pit of hell.

It resembled a man only in as much as it had a head, torso and four limbs but that was where the resemblance ended. The thing lurched towards him, arms outstretched, hands ending in claws that looked like metal spikes driven into flesh. Its limbs were red muscle, flayed raw, dripping with plasma and ichor. The creature's face was seemingly stitched to a skull of sorts, hanging oddly so that the features were drooped and rucked into each other, ending in a gash where a jaw had been secured to the upper skull. Bits of metal and what looked like machinery were attached to the thing at odd intervals, making up part of a leg here, part of its sternum there. It limped towards Grogan, a bloodcurdling hiss issuing from its broken mouth.

Grogan leapt back, hearing as he did so the sound of chanting resume. He had no time to think about it before the foul creature was on him. He thumbed the switch on his chainsword, hearing the reassuring whirr as its teeth carved the air.

The beast covered the ground between it and the inquisitor in two strides. He could smell the putrid smell of rotting flesh as it reached out for him. The metal claws on its hands raked Grogan's chest, the armour there sparking from the force of the attack. The inquisitor lashed out with his boot and connected with the thing's kneecap, knocking it back. It fell onto one knee but then rose again. Grogan could see the white sheen of bone where his boot had broken the thing's knee but it didn't seem to notice, ignoring any pain it may have felt and lurched back towards the fray.

Grogan cut the air with his chainsword, slashing the creature across one shoulder. No blood spurted from the wound, instead the flesh separated and the pink muscle tissue gleamed wetly. The thing roared with anger and jumped at Grogan. It landed on his chest, the weight of it knocking the wind out of him. He fell on his back, his right arm up against the creature's chest, trying to stop the slaver jaws from ripping his throat out, foul breath choking him. Held away from his face, the creature began to pound against Grogan's belly with its feet. Pain wracked the inquisitor. Slowly, he pressed the muzzle of his hellgun against the belly of the creature and fired.

There was a roar as the creature was hurled up in the air, and then it landed down on Grogan, the stench of suppurating flesh making him gag. He scrambled to his feet.

And froze...

In front of him the great doors stood ajar. Between them, Cantor stood, outlined in shimmering light.

No, not stood, floated. Suspended in a nimbus of light, the old tech-priest hung, like a heretic on a rack, writhing in pain. Tendrils of light wrapped themselves round his body and spun it round.

The dark voice came again, this time appearing inside Grogan's head without Cantor speaking. At the same time, it reverberated around the room, causing the pillars to shake.

‘Inquisitor! You are most welcome!’

The inquisitor raised his weapon. ‘Die, hellspawn!’ he spat. He pressed the trigger.

The gun recoiled, there was a flash of light and he saw the shell hurtle towards Cantor. Before it could impact, there was a shimmer in the air as if the very fabric of reality had turned to glue. The bullet slowed, stopped, then clattered to the floor, inert. Then the handle of the hellgun jumped in his hand. Then his chainsword too jumped from his grasp and the two weapons clattered to the ground.

‘Really, inquisitor, that showed no imagination.’ The voice was soothing, paternal, chuckling as if at a disappointing but much loved child. ‘I have called to you across time and space and this is how you welcome me.’

‘Who... who are you?’ Grogan’s voice was shaky.

‘I am Szarach’il, the Great Destroyer, Devourer of Souls, daemon, world defiler. Endless was the torment I inflicted on the galaxy. Whole systems fell before me. Then my great crusade brought me to this accursed planet. Nothing could stop me, until I came face to face with one man, an inquisitor from the dawning of your order, who rallied his men. He had studied my kind, he knew he could not destroy me. Instead, coward that he was, he wrought a dungeon for me here and incarcerated me. Eternity I languished here in this pit, this abyss, until the scratchings of these Mechanicus slaves woke me from my slumber. They had no idea that this whole planet was my prison, buried as I was at its heart.

‘When they broke through the city limits into the prison’s outer chambers I knew that my time was once more drawing nigh. This one, this tech-priest, he burned for knowledge and delved deep into the planet. Weak though I was after my imprisonment, I was able to control him for certain periods. With each hour, the day of my release grew closer, but what then? I was trapped on the planet with old men and half machine creatures. Their spirits were slight. I would perish without souls, without strength to feed me.

‘Then I realised how to live, to thrive and to use the very instrument of the Imperium to release me from this planet and be the

instrument of my revenge. Through this man, I stalked the city once more, killing his fellows. How I relished the spilling of blood again after all these centuries. How I laughed at their feeble cries as I ripped the still beating heart from one, the very flesh from the bones of another. I felt free again. And under my instruction, this human constructed the creature you have vanquished. It would protect him from any threat until the doors were discovered and the runes imprisoning me read and broken.

‘And I knew that he would be horrified at the killings that he had no memory of carrying out, for by day, he was his own man with no recollection of what he had done while I controlled him. I read his mind and saw his old friendship with the inquisitor. He would seek help from his old friend and that man would come. A man strong, resolute, full of power and ambition, and then, I would have the body that would allow me to escape this planet and cut a swathe of revenge through the ranks of the Imperium. A fitting irony, don’t you agree?’

Grogan stood, staggered at this revelation. He took a step backwards.

‘Not so fast, human. I have been kept talking too long but it has been many ages since I heard my own voice. Now is the time for action.’

Cantor held out a hand. A tendril of light flickered from it and snaked through the air towards Grogan. It reached him and his body writhed in the coruscating light as the daemon took possession. The moment the tendril touched Grogan, the light that had surrounded Cantor disappeared. The techpriest fell from the air, and crashed in a crumpled heap on the floor. He raised his head and looked at Grogan, his eyes normal again, his body his own. ‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered and his head fell back. His eyes went blank and he was still.

Szarach’il stretched his new arms and Grogan’s features twitched in a parody of a smile. He whirled round at a noise and came face to face with Anselm. The daemon could tell from the look on the inquisitor’s face that he had seen everything that had taken place in the last few moments. The daemon raised one hand and Grogan’s discarded chainsword flew into his hand. He activated it and waved it experimentally at Anselm.

Anselm raised his own sword and sidled into the room, giving himself some space as he activated the blade. Grogan leapt at him, the sword a blur of whirling teeth. Anselm raised his own in a parry and the two blades met in mid air, sparks flying from the discharged energy. Anselm's arm rang with the force of the blow. Even before, Grogan had been far stronger physically and now the daemon within him added the force of his own infernal strength to that of the inquisitor. Anselm's sword slid down the length of his opponent's and as they broke contact, he spun, swinging the blade down low in a sweeping arc. Grogan jumped, easily evading the blade and a bellow of pleasure issued from his mouth.

'You humans are not as puny as I remembered. This one is strong and I see that you too are skilled with a blade. The contest is pleasing to me.' As Anselm looked at his old master, the man's face seemed to change, and for a second Anselm saw the bestial face of the daemon, his hyena smile, the long teeth; then the vision changed and Grogan's face reasserted itself.

Anselm tried not to think of Grogan as a human any longer; he was a creature of darkness, a vessel for infernal power. That was how Grogan would have thought about it if the roles had been reversed. His former tutor would have had no trouble in executing him if it had been he who had succumbed to daemonic power, no matter how unfortunate it may have been.

He lunged at Grogan, fainted, then pulled back. Grogan bellowed again, and thrust forward. Anselm dodged the thrust, putting out his boot and tripping his former tutor. The creature stumbled and rammed his head against the wall. It turned and for a moment, the eyes changed, and Anselm could see the deep wells of darkness clear and Grogan's own eyes gaze out at him.

'Anselm, my pupil,' he croaked. 'Remember that the path of the inquisitor... is one of holy fire. One must... fight fire... with fire.'


The eyes darkened briefly, then lightened. Grogan made a gesture. His hellgun, lying unnoticed against the wall, flew into his hand. He raised it, towards Anselm... then slowly, shakingly, upwards until it pointed towards the ceiling.

'Get.... out!' Grogan croaked and pulled the trigger. The shell flew upwards and hit the ceiling. There was a moment of awful silence and then a tremendous roar. The ceiling shattered above the daemon and an instant later, a cascade of molten lava fell, obliterating Grogan in a waterfall of glowing heat. It hissed as it hit the floor and immediately began to harden, the solid rock being covered with more lava that flowed endlessly from the ceiling, a stalactite of solid fire with Grogan at its core.

Anselm jumped back, scrambling to get away from the river of magma that began to flow towards him. He stumbled and his boots smoked as spraying droplets of lava touched them. The flow was relentless and he felt his eyebrows singeing from the intense heat. Gathering his strength, he ran from the room. Looking behind him, he could see the room beginning to fill with the fiery molten stone. At the doorway, he passed Eremet standing in horror watching the scene unfold, and pulled the speechless explorer along with him.

They ran until they reached the long passageway. Behind them, at the mouth of the passage, there was a wall of glowing rock that was slowly, relentlessly moving towards them. Fear lent them strength and, lungs screaming with the effort, they ran. Behind them, the magma, rose, solidifying as it did so, sealing off the body of his former tutor with its daemon intruder forever.

They reached the command module and Eremet gave the evacuation order. The archaeotech site at Barathrum was no more. There would be no more digging after eldritch knowledge here. Barathrum's secrets would remain locked under countless tonnes of stone, sealed forever.

Later, as he sat, strapped into the seat of the Imperial shuttle that carried them from the planet, Anselm looked back at the archaeosite as it disappeared under the fury of a newly born volcano. He found himself pondering Grogan's final words, and for the first time since he was received as a novice amongst the ranks of the Inquisition, he found he could agree with his old tutor and erstwhile foe. In a universe full of Chaos and darkness sometimes it was necessary to fight fire with fire. 

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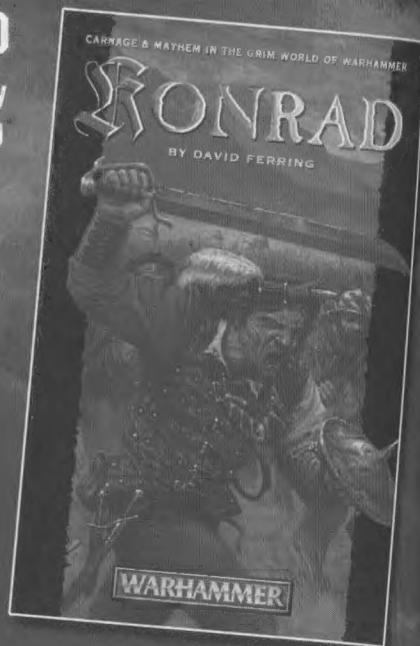
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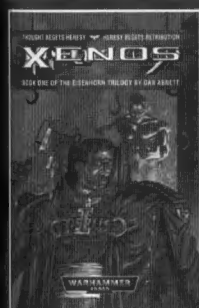
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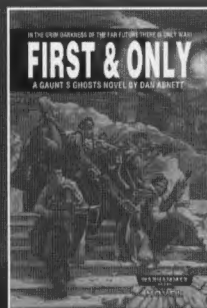
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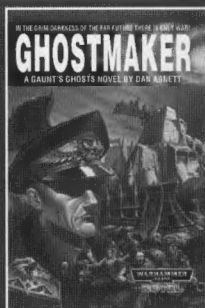
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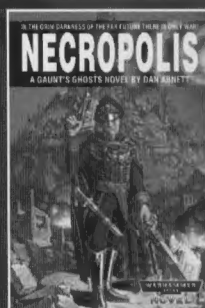
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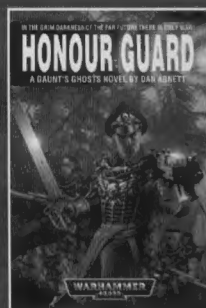
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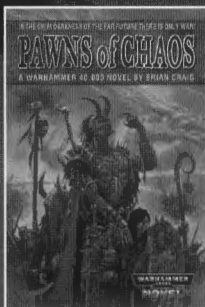
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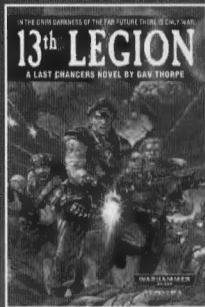
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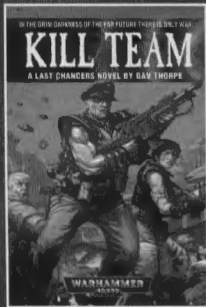
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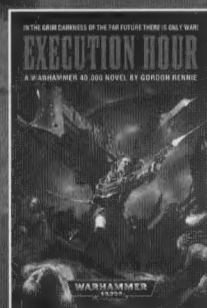
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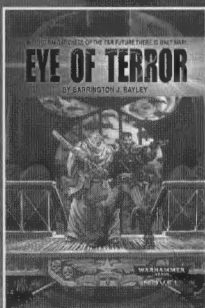
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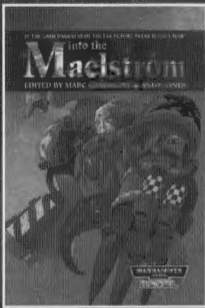
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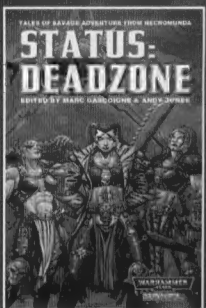
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Kallin was already firing on his side, meaning the bikers were almost upon them. The foot patrol blazed away with every chance they were given, and shells were impacting fiercely on the Defixio's hull. The noise was appalling, for the orks liked their weapons loud – but Samiel didn't care. They could make all the noise they wanted, they weren't taking down these Dead Moon scummers without the hardest fight of their lives. His heavy bolter roared with the defiance he felt boiling inside him, and another ork was run through on a lance of hot steel.

• MEAT & BONE by Robin D. Laws

Angelika felt the leaden weight of her feet, planted on the planks of the cart. She felt the puniness of the tiny knife in her hand. She gulped and sprinted forwards. The orc swung prematurely, and she slipped under his blow to jab her knife up at his throat. But she could not reach, and the knife hit his blackened breastplate, bending like a blade of grass. She rolled, trying to make it through his trunk-like legs, but he closed them on her, and squeezed. She felt wrenching pain as he grabbed one of her legs and twisted it. She wriggled herself forwards and somehow out of his grip. She turned and rolled and hit the planks. Air bolted from her lungs as her opponent kicked her in the side with metal-toed boots. She rolled again and up to her feet and staggered forwards.

• TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT by Green & Stoddart

THE EXECUTIONER'S TALE

'Enough! Take this traitorous harlot and her pouting peacock of a lover from my sight! They both die at dawn!'

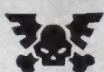
• BARATHRUM by Jonathan Curran

There was a high pitched hum and a beam of intense red light erupted from a point above the doors and focused on the tech-priest. The luminescence washing over the ceiling darkened momentarily as if someone had thrown ink into a bowl of bright liquid. The tech-priest writhed as he was caught in the beam of light, a silent scream forced from his lips. Then the light was gone and the man collapsed, like a puppet Anselm had once seen on Darcia that had had its strings cut. Grogan ran over to the man and prodded him with the toe of his boot. Nothing happened. He knelt down and pressed his finger to the man's neck.

'Dead!' he announced.

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